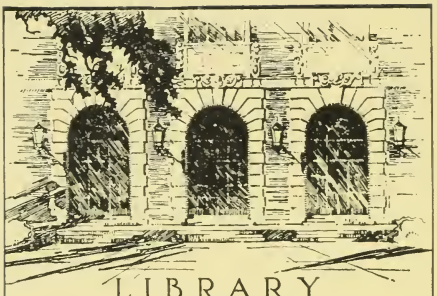

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CRŒSUS'S WIDOW

A Novel

BY

DORA RUSSELL

AUTHOR OF "FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW," "THE VICAR'S GOVERNESS,"
"ANNABEL'S RIVAL," "BENEATH THE WAVE," "QUITE TRUE,"
"THE MINER'S OATH," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON
JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL
MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE
FLEET STREET

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TILLOTSON & SON, BOLTON.

CRŒSUS'S WIDOW.

CHAPTER I.

"BABY."

IT was generally a very happy home—made bright and happy by its sweet young mistress—where, week after week, Nellie lay utterly prostrate. The long strain and anxiety on her mind, and then the terrible shock she had received, had brought on a sort of low fever, and the memory of her misery even at times grew dull and dim.

She was in truth, very, very ill; so ill that even good-natured Tom Bertrim began to look and speak very gravely about her condition.

"I really think, do you know, Dossie," he said, "we should try to find out who she is.

Just fancy, if the poor soul were to die, dear, what an awkward position we would be in! I suggest we apply to the police."

But Dossie would not hear of this.

"I'll speak to her when she gets a little better," she said. "I'll ask her to make a friend of me, Tom; and who knows, dear, she may become a happy woman yet. Don't be hard and horrid, Tom—in fact, I won't let you!"

Tom shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Well, little woman, have your own way," he said; "but what if some despairing husband is seeking for this poor lady all this while?"

"Then why did he drive her out to try to drown herself in her misery?" replied Dossie. "Tom, dear, he's a bad man, I'm sure; and I who have got such a good, kind husband—when we are so happy, Tom—shouldn't we try to do a little good?"

This very illogical argument was quite sufficient for the good-natured Tom. He kissed his Dossie's rosy lips; he felt himself strong enough to resist all persuasions which were against his Dossie's wishes.

For, as in all earthly Edens there is some small, creeping, lurking evil hidden among the

flowers, so even in this happy home at Castlewood Lodge, a small evil in the shape of jealousy between the respective mothers of the two young people, occasionally disturbed Mr. Tom Bertrim's usual serenity.

Dossie was an only child, and Tom an only son. No one, therefore, naturally, was good enough for Dossie in Mrs. Barrett's eyes, and no one was good enough for Tom in Mrs. Bertrim's. This was the first element of jealousy between the two mothers, but this first element was constantly augmented by small social jealousies. If Mrs. Barrett gave a dinner party and invited the "best" people she knew, it immediately behoved Mrs. Bertrim to give a dinner party also, and invite her "best" friends. And the social standing of these friends was a sore and jealous point between the ladies. The line was so fine between them, that probably no one else saw it (especially after the young people were married), but both Mrs. Barrett and Mrs. Bertrim saw it, and were bitter about it in their secret hearts. Mrs. Barrett was the daughter of a banker, and Mrs. Bertrim the daughter of a wine merchant. There was the line! Mrs. Barrett held herself to be above Mrs. Bertrim

in position, though they were both married to commercial men in the city of about equal standing. Mrs. Bertrim resented this holding up of Mrs. Barrett's head, and so jealousy was between them; jealousy, however, always properly and decorously veiled.

And we may be sure both the mothers kept their eyes on Castlewood Lodge; and to give Mrs. Bertrim her due, she was fond, on the whole, of her daughter-in-law Dossie.

"Tom makes a fool of himself about her," she was very apt to say; but still she admitted that "Mrs. Tom" was a very sweet young woman, "very different from her mother, though she very often did absurd things; and as for taking in this poor woman whom nobody knows, and nursing her like a sister—Tom is a fool to allow it!"

Mrs. Bertrim not only said this to a married daughter, but she also told her son Tom her true opinion, and Tom began to think that perhaps he might be a fool. So he spoke to Dossie; but as Dossie objected, and objected as we have seen in so judicious a manner, Tom felt strong enough to resist either mother or mother-in-law.

"Your mother told you to say this, didn't she, Tom?" continued Mrs. Tom, putting her pretty hand in her husband's, and smiling in his face.

Tom nodded his head, and gave a little laugh.

"Never mind," said Dossie; "we won't let either mother or mother-in-law make us fight, will we?"

"I should think not," answered Tom stoutly.

"I should think not too," said Dossie. "Of course, darling," she added, "I would, and always will try to do what *you* wish. If *you* wished me to turn a poor broken-hearted young creature out, on the cruel mercies of the world, I would do it, only I know you *wouldn't* wish me—that you wouldn't be my own dear Tom if you did wish me—and so I'm quite safe, because you are my own dear old darling Tom!"

Thus this pretty, kind-hearted young woman got her own way. When her own mother objected to her nursing the unfortunate stranger she had taken in, Dossie told Mrs. Barrett that Tom wished it, and that she had consulted Tom about it, and therefore what could Mrs. Barrett say?

"Keep the dear baby out of her way, that's

all I can say," sighed Mrs. Barrett, and upon this point (for once in their lives) Mrs. Barrett and Mrs. Bertrim agreed.

They both indeed adored the baby. They had no other grandchild, and the baby's robust legs, pink curled-up toes, and one tooth, were unending sources of gratification and conversation to the two grandmothers. And now they both took up arms for "baby's" sake, against the hapless stranger lying deadly sick under Dossie's hospitable roof.

"The fever may be catching, and think of the darling baby, Dossie," urged her own mother.

"As Tom's mother, it is my duty to point out to you, Dossie, the danger to which you are exposing his son," severely remarked the mother-in-law.

"Please don't scold me," Dossie replied, almost in the same words to each mother, "for I am only doing what I think right. And baby is quite safe—do you not think I love my own darling little boy well enough to take care of him? Babies don't take low, nervous fevers, though broken-hearted women do; and as I have my husband's leave, I don't think there can be any harm in it."

"Your husband would give you leave to do anything you wish, Dossie, it seems to me," remarked Mrs. Bertrim, with a mother's jealousy of the young wife's influence.

"Yes, isn't he a dear old fellow?" answered Dossie in her bright good-tempered way, for she never appeared to notice any of what her mother-in-law called "hints," and thus escaped many a useless and unpleasant argument.

And all this while (when the two mothers were making their comments), Dossie nursed and attended upon her unfortunate guest as if she were her sister. And she used, as Nellie grew a little better, to take in baby to see her. At first the dim, sunken eyes never noticed baby, and Dossie considered this a very bad sign. But one day Dossie noticed the poor invalid was watching the child with a strange, wistful look.

Without a word the young mother carried her rosy, lovely boy to the bed, and placed him in Nellie's arms. For a moment or two Nellie made no sign. But baby, who was quite at home with strangers, put his little chubby face against hers, and pursed up his rosy mouth to be kissed. As he did so Nellie drew him to

her breast, and then quick, sharp sobs came to her relief. They were the first tears that Dossie had seen her shed since she had been at Castlewood, and as she wept and wailed over the child, it seemed to Dossie that some hope dawned in her face.

"Kiss baby, dear, again," said Dossie to her gently, in a few minutes; "see, the little fellow thinks you are angry with him if you don't, and then I'll carry him to nurse and come back to you."

Nellie kissed the child, and murmured a few inarticulate words of tenderness over the fair curly head.

"Say good-bye to the lady, baby," said the young mother, lifting the little one in her arms; and after she had given him to his nurse, she returned to Nellie's bedside, and knelt down, and took one of the poor wasted hands.

"Tell me your trouble, dear," said Dossie, in her sweet kind voice. "Don't mind telling me anything—I'm a woman too, and women are often silly you know when they care very much for anyone—and I hope you are better now, that you are getting better—"

"It would be better if I were dead," sobbed

Nellie. "I wish to die—thank you very much for all your kindness to me—but I wish to die."

"But, dear, we can't die when we wish, but when God chooses," said Dossie, "and we must try to do the best we can for everyone while we live."

"You—you are very good," wept Nellie. "I once saw a good man die—he seemed very happy—but, but God has forsaken me!"

"He forsakes no one, dear," answered Dossie, with her simple, practical faith. "Do not be afraid—you are not forsaken."

"I have been cruelly, cruelly deceived—I cannot tell you the story—but I thought, was sure, quite sure, I was married—and then—then, he told me I was not—that—that—"

But sobs here literally choked the unhappy Nellie, and Dossie bent over her, and kissed the tear-stained, burning face.

"It is not your sin or wrong," she said, "but his. Hush, dear! all may come right yet—hush!—I will always be your friend."

After this, little by little, Nellie told her story, but she did not tell Lord Seaforth's name.

"I promised not to tell. I cannot break my word, though he has broken his," she told

Dossie; and Dossie, who had listened to her pitiful tale with an indignant flush on her sweet, sympathetic face, nodded her head.

"I would never speak to him more, never see him more, if I were you," exclaimed Dossie. She could not understand any man treating a woman thus, when he had once loved or seemed to love her. In all her own sheltered life she had been made almost an idol of, for her father and mother loved her so dearly, and her Tom was devoted to her, and no trouble had ever been permitted to approach her. And to hear this miserable story, to see this poor broken-hearted young creature, crushed down as it were, by sorrow, was very terrible to Dossie.

"I don't know what to advise," she said, jumping up from the chair on which she was sitting by Nellie's bedside, to hide her own tears, "except you stay on here, dear, and try to get well, and I'll come and talk to you again presently." And Dossie stooped down and kissed Nellie, and then ran quickly out of the room.

After a while she came back.

"I've been thinking it all over," she said, in her kind, impulsive way. "Of course I couldn't

tell Tom. I have no secrets of my own from Tom—indeed, how could I have any secrets, when he helps me so about everything. But this is not my secret, but yours; and so I've been obliged to think for myself, and I've thought that perhaps it would be best for you to write to this gentleman, and tell him where you are."

Nellie's pale face flushed deeply at this proposal.

"I think it would be right," continued Dossie. "He mayn't have meant what he said—quite! He may have repented for having been so cruel, and I think you should write."

Nellie lay silent. It was all so bitter to her—more bitter than death—but what was she to do? She knew she could not go on living under the roof of these kind strangers; and to go back to her father seemed more terrible to her than it had ever been.

"It would kill him," she thought, with a moan, turning on her pillow; and Dossie, hearing that cry of anguish, came and lay her sweet cheek against Nellie's.

"Hush, don't distress yourself!" said Dossie. "I know how you must feel it, but I thought and

thought what would be best—for I feel so stupid when I can't consult Tom—and I really think you ought to write. If—if this gentleman has any heart, after all you have suffered, he will be only too glad to hear from you."

And after a while—after thinking her miserable position over and over—Nellie at last did determine to write to Seaforth, to make one more appeal to his honour and his heart.

Oh! they were sad, sad words to write, these! He had crushed the love out of her heart, and bowed her head with shame, and for her own sake she never would have sought to see him more. She sat up in bed and tried to write, but could find no words to express her misery. These words—the wretched cry for help—which at last she penned, need not be repeated here. They were never fated to meet the eyes for whom they were intended. Nellie enclosed her letter under cover (as in the old days) to Clayton; but Clayton had gone to join his master at Ryecourt, and had left no address, and the unhappy girl's letter never even reached Clayton.

But in the meantime, at the earnest entreaty of her kind, sweet hostess, Nellie was trying to

rouse herself; to shake off the deadly stupor, almost bewilderment, from her mind. At length she was persuaded to leave her bedroom, and in a pretty little room at the end of the large drawing-room at Castlewood, Dossie installed the shattered, trembling creature, who but a few months ago had been fair Nellie Blythe.

But Christmas had come and gone, and the New Year begun, before even this change could be made. And this change was not made, we may be quite sure, without the observation and remarks of both the mother and the mother-in-law of the young people at Castlewood. The room downstairs where Nellie was removed, was in truth the small drawing-room, but it was separated from the other drawing-room by folding-doors, which Dossie locked, after giving the servants orders that no one was to be allowed to disturb the invalid lady.

But Mrs. Bertrim was a woman who liked (as she expressed it) to know the end of everything. This unknown and nameless guest of her daughter-in-law's, was therefore, a perpetual worry to her, and she was determined to see her. She watched her opportunity. Dossei

had driven into London to make some purchases, and Mrs. Bertrim, having learnt that Dossie was going into town on such a day, chose that day for an unexpected visit to Castlewood Lodge.

She arrived, was told "Mrs. Tom" was not at home, but, nevertheless, ordered her coachman to stable his horses. Then, with a determined step, she entered the house, and laid a determined hand on the handle of the small drawing-room door. But Dossie's maid here tried to stop her.

"The poor, sick lady is there, ma'am," she said, "and Mrs. Bertrim left particular orders she was not to be disturbed."

Mrs. Bertrim, senior, made no reply to the maid's remark. She opened the small drawing-room door, and walked straight in. She was a stout woman, with the signs of good cheer and prosperity on every line of her face. On a couch drawn close to the fire, as she entered the room, another woman, with a white wasted face, was lying, who started up with a nervous, frightened look, on the appearance of Mrs. Bertrim's burly form and rosy visage.

Mrs. Bertrim, senior, bowed stiffly, and Nellie nervously.

"I hope you are feeling better?" said Mrs. Bertrim, eyeing Nellie with hard, curious eyes.

"Yes, I am a little better, I think," answered Nellie, in a low, feeble voice.

"You have had a long illness," said Mrs. Bertrim.

"Yes," replied Nellie, in a yet lower and more feeble voice.

"This is my son's house," continued Mrs. Bertrim, "so you must excuse my making an observation or two—but I think it is quite time you communicated with your friends."

Nellie made no reply to this. She looked up, her white, drawn, wasted face flushed for a moment, and then grew pale again; but she was too ill, and too weak, to speak.

"My daughter-in-law," began Mrs. Bertrim, senior; but as she said the words she suddenly paused, for—voluminous as herself, and with indignation imprinted on her rosy features—Mrs. Barrett at this moment walked into the room.

"My daughter left particular orders, Mrs. Bertrim," said Mrs. Barrett, with emphasis, "that no one was to enter this room; so

perhaps you will excuse me asking you to withdraw, as the lady is too ill to be disturbed, and my daughter gave positive orders before she went to town to that effect."

"Oh! indeed!" answered Mrs. Bertrim, tossing her head with a very unpleasant little laugh. "I was not aware that there were state secrets and locked doors in my son's house. I was not aware I was intruding when I entered any room in my son's house. But it seems that I am—it seems that my son's house is not open at least to *his* family."

"I am only repeating my daughter's wishes, Mrs. Bertrim," said Mrs. Barrett. "I am no more mistress here, as you are aware, than you are. But as my daughter was going to town to-day, she asked me to come and spend the day with baby. Baby is not quite well—"

"Not quite well?" interrupted the other grandmother with real anxiety. "I told Dossie something would happen to the child if she did not take care—I may go up and see baby, I suppose, at any rate, Mrs. Barrett?"

"Of course, Mrs. Bertrim—your own grandchild!"

Upon this the two grandmothers left the

room to look after the precious child, and the poor weary invalid was alone. But Nellie had learned during their brief visit that perhaps she might bring trouble and worry on her sweet hostess if she stayed much longer at Castlewood Lodge.

CHAPTER II.

WHO GOT NELLIE'S SECOND LETTER.

Dossie Bertrim was very angry indeed when she heard from her mother, on her return from town, that her mother-in-law had intruded herself upon her unhappy guest. Dossie, in spite of her great sweetness and kindness of disposition, had a temper of her own when she was fairly roused, and she was fairly roused by this unladylike act of her mother-in-law. In fact, a somewhat serious family quarrel arose in consequence; and to add to Dossie's annoyance the post one day brought her a letter returned from the dead-letter office. This letter was the one which Dossie had persuaded the unfortunate girl under her roof to write to Seaforth, under cover to his servant Clayton. By Dossie's request, the answer ought to have been addressed, under cover, to *Mrs. T. Bertrim*,

Castlewood Lodge. The letter had been opened at the post-office, and was returned to Castlewood Lodge with a notification on the envelope that no such person as Clayton was to be found.

Dossie was exceedingly annoyed at this. Her husband opened the post-bag as usual, and saw the letter, and handed it to his wife, and very naturally asked her what it was about.

Dossie had the good sense at once to tell her husband the truth. The poor, unhappy lady upstairs had written a letter and sent it under cover to this person Clayton, who apparently could not be found, explained Dossie, and the answer ought to have come under cover to her.

Good-natured Tom Bertrim listened, and then began whistling to himself.

"I say, Dossie," he said, presently, "I think it has a very shady look."

"Why, Tom? This man may have gone away, mayn't he?" replied Dossie.

"He may, certainly," said Tom; "but all the same, little woman, I think you really ought to see about getting another home for this poor creature. You see the old lady is very much offended about all this row, and it makes the house so uncomfortable to have rows in it;

and as, of course, she must go away some day or other, I advise you really dear to urge her to write to her friends—for as my mother says—"

"Don't tell me what your mother says, Tom," answered Dossie, turning very red. "I don't want any quarrels, but all the same I won't let anyone but you order me about in my own house. Of course if you wish it—"

"I do wish it, dear little woman, only don't vex yourself about it," said Tom. "If she want's money, of course you know she can have it, and there is no particular hurry; but still if you don't mind, I think it is a pity for us to have any more quarrels and worries about a stranger."

Dossie was very much upset at this conversation, and also to be forced to tell the poor girl she had befriended, that her letter had been returned through the post.

She broke this news as gently as she could, and Nellie never spoke a word. But by-and-by a few heavy tears began to roll down the sunken cheeks, and the lips to twitch nervously.

"This man, of course, may have gone away," said Dossie, trying to speak hopefully. "You

see the letter has never reached him, so of course it has never reached—the gentleman. I would advise you to write direct to the gentleman—"

Then Nellie spoke.

"Mrs. Bertrim," she said, "I had better go from here—I ought to go away from here."

"But why?" asked Dossie, with faltering lips, for she was thinking of what her husband had said.

"Because I shall only bring trouble upon you—because every one is not like you—and—and I suppose I'm not fit to be in your house." And Nellie burst into choking sobs.

Dossie knew at this moment that this was her mother-in-law's doing; she knew that this poor broken-hearted creature had seen and understood the purport of her mother-in-law's visit, and Dossie felt very indignant.

"I am my own mistress," said Dossie, "and no one shall dictate to me whom I shall receive into my own house. But" (Dossie still remembering her husband's words) "I have just thought of a nice change for you. Our old coachman at home married a few years ago, and I know them very well, and they let

lodgings not far from Victoria Station—and if you would like to go to them, you can of course have as much money as you want—you know I have money of my own; even Tom knows nothing about it."

Nellie put out her trembling hand, which Dossie Bertrim eagerly took.

"I do not know how to thank you," said Nellie. "I would like to go where you name—and if you will lend me some money now, it shall be repaid to you—my father—"

"Do not distress yourself, please," urged Dossie.

"I was only going to say," continued poor Nellie, trying to speak quietly, "that I know my father will repay you this—but I cannot go to him just now—I cannot! I cannot!"

"I know, dear; and about the money, it is all right. I will, if you wish it—as soon as you feel well enough to move, of course—write to this Mrs. Moore. She is a most respectable woman, I know, and she will take care of you and nurse you. But there is one thing you must promise, or I will not let you go."

"What must I promise?" said Nellie, wearily.

"Never to—do anything rash again—not

to harm yourself, I mean—and also not to run away from *me*. Now, will you promise?"

"Yes," half-whispered Nellie, and Dossie bent down and kissed her face.

"Very well, then," she said, "I will trust you. I will write to Mrs. Moore, and as soon as you are strong enough I will drive you into town."

This arrangement was carried out a few days later. In fact, both Nellie and Dossie Bertrim felt that Nellie was now better away from Castlewood Lodge. And Nellie had made up her mind to endeavour to see Seaforth. Surely when he saw her—when he knew all—his heart would relent. And she could not, of course, try to see him at Castlewood. Therefore as soon as the doctor would give his consent, Nellie begged to be taken to her new home. She little guessed how anxiously and constantly she had been sought for; she little guessed how bitterly (to do him justice) Seaforth had grieved over her uncertain fate; and how Strathearn was unceasingly endeavouring to trace her.

It was close on the end of January when she left Castlewood Lodge. By this time Seaforth had grown so utterly weary of Ryecourt that

his mother had urged him to go to Paris for a change, and had borrowed the money from her old friend, Hugh Marchmont, to take him there. Seaforth, however, did not leave England without making another effort to hear something of Nellie. He wrote to the police from Dover, and there awaited their reply. They had nothing to tell him but what he already knew. Mr. Campbell, of Strathearn, had offered a reward of two hundred pounds for the discovery of the same lady, and was making other strenuous efforts, he was told, but hitherto without result. But there was no doubt that the lady who endeavoured to throw herself from the bridge at Chelsea and "Mrs. Murray" were identical; therefore Lord Seaforth might reasonably be satisfied that she was well taken care of.

And with this meagre information Seaforth went away. He was best away, Mr. Cairns wrote him word. "Strathearn will look after her if she casts up," thought Seaforth, with a bitter smile.

Thus when Nellie went to live in the small street near Victoria Station, where the late coachman of Mr. and Mrs. Barrett lived, Seaforth was in Paris. He was miserable enough,

to do him justice, for he had not forgotten Nellie, but he blamed her as well as he blamed himself. It was heartless and unfeeling of her never to have written to him, he thought, not to have sent one line to tell him of her safety, when she must know how much she must have caused him to suffer by her mysterious disappearance.

All the time he had stayed at Ryecourt, his mother had never named the subject to him. She had named another subject frequently, and this was his marriage to Nora Trelawn. She had pointed out again and again, how this marriage would save him, and when she proposed for him to go to Paris, she was only carrying out a scheme which she had formed in her own mind.

This scheme was to invite Nora to stay with her at Hugh Marchmont's when Seaforth was away. She knew it would look too marked to invite her when her son was there, but she laid her plans fairly well.

Nora was to be invited to "take pity" upon her, as Seaforth was away, and then Seaforth was unexpectedly to return during the rich widow's visit. The first act of this social drama

was to get Seaforth away, and he was only too glad to go. He was weary of the great stillness and rest at Ryecourt, and he knew he was totally and completely unsuited for the society of his mother's distant kinsman—Hugh Marchmont.

Lady Seaforth had written to Nora frequently during her stay at Ryecourt, and Nora had always replied in a friendly and kindly spirit. Nora, in truth, liked my lady much better since that dismal day when circumstances had compelled her to bow her proud head and come to Nora for help and assistance. So in the early days of Spring, when the violets and snowdrops were beginning to show their modest heads in the woods round Ryecourt, Lady Seaforth wrote and asked Nora if she would take compassion on her, and spend a few days with her "in this remote and old-fashioned spot, where my distant kinsman, Hugh Marchmont, literally lives among his flowers. Seaforth is in Paris," continued my lady's letter, "and it is very, very dull here, for Mr. Marchmont never entertains, even if there were any one in the neighbourhood whom I could have any pleasure in meeting. But as far as I can learn, there is

not. However, I know you love the country, and the country is pretty, and the gardens are very pretty; and my kinsman (whom I have told of your great kindness to Seaforth and myself) desires me to say he will be charmed if you will pay us a visit."

Nora read this letter with a smile, and then handed it to her aunt, Lady Stainbrooke, who had once more, almost uninvited, established herself and her old General at Nora's house in South Kensington.

Lady Stainbrooke put on her glasses and read the letter, and then nodded her head.

"I would go if I were you, Nora," she said; "the change will do you good—you want change," she added significantly.

"Do I?" said Nora, and she coloured slightly. "I am very well, Aunt Stainbrooke."

"Yes, my dear; but still I think a little change would do you good," continued Lady Stainbrooke. "It would freshen you up, you see, for the season—and Lady Seaforth is a very agreeable person."

Nora laughed quite merrily. She knew how anxious her aunt was that she should marry Lord Seaforth; though had her aunt known

how much money she had advanced to Lord Seaforth, she would have thought twice about the matter.

But during the time of Lord Seaforth's illness, and the great trouble in the house, Lady Stainbrooke and her General had been at Buckstone, and Lady Stainbrooke only knew that Lord Seaforth was an embarrassed man, and had had a fever, and that her niece, Nora, had been a great deal with her neighbour during the time of the young lord's illness.

Naturally, perhaps, then Lady Stainbrooke expected Nora would marry Seaforth.

"Thank goodness that Vyner is married and out of the way now," she had shouted to her General, when she first heard the news of Vyner's marriage. She indeed understood everything now about Nora's conduct which she had not understood before.

"So he told her he was engaged that day at Roseland, I suppose," smiled her ladyship to herself, "and this was the reason of Nora's rude behaviour to me. Poor man," she inwardly reflected, "I really pity him—fancy losing such a fortune as Nora's by a mere chance, for she would certainly have been fool enough to take

him. Ay, ay, and I suppose he tried to get off fulfilling his engagement, and the girl wouldn't let him—yes, I see it all now, and I am thankful I have seen the last of him."

But, to Lady Stainbrooke's surprise and annoyance, she found upon her return to Nora's house that she had not seen the last of Mr. Vyner. Nay, she found that one evening at least in the week, Vyner was sure to be seen in Nora's drawing-room. She found, in fact, that Vyner and Nora continued to be friends, and that they seemed to find a thousand subjects to talk about, in which they both had a surprising interest.

"Allow me to congratulate you on your marriage, Mr. Vyner," she had said to the painter in her old jaunty way, when she first met him again at Nora's house. "Ah—ah—I used to say there was a lady in the way, you remember? I hear the new Mrs. Vyner is a very suitable person."

Vyner only bowed. He could not endure Lady Stainbrooke, and was, indeed, hardly civil to her.

"He's getting very old-looking," Lady Stainbrooke told Nora, after Vyner left; "these

dark men never wear well, and he is decidedly sallow—and do you ever see the wife?"

"Oh, yes," answered Nora, perhaps a little consciously; "she has dined here once or twice—but I do not see very much of her. Mr. Vyner is different, he is an old friend."

"Yes," said Lady Stainbrooke, dryly; "but you must take care, my dear," she added, "the world is censorious."

"There is nothing to be censorious about," answered Nora, hotly, though she felt she blushed. "Mr. Vyner is an old friend, and shall always be received and treated as such in my house."

So her ladyship said nothing more, but all the same she would sometimes watch Nora and Vyner rather uneasily. All the world might have heard every word they ever spoke to each other, but the hours spent in Nora's drawing-room were the only hours of Vyner's life that were not now very wearisome to him.

At home he knew he was drifting further and further away from Margaret. But Margaret never saw this. She was always busy; her house, her servants, and her father occupying her whole attention. She was disappointed in "Walter,"

certainly. His temper was "variable," she confided to her old friend, Mrs. Saunders; but Mrs. Saunders counselled her "to put up with it," and she took this excellent woman's advice.

There were no open quarrels, therefore, between the husband and wife, yet they constantly disagreed. But still, Margaret felt that she had done well in life, and that she was the help and comfort of her father's declining years. She was, in fact, a good daughter, and no doubt in some ways a good wife also. She did everything she ought to do; but she so constantly reminded you of this, that her egotism effaced her virtues.

And, weary of this everlasting self-praise and self-assertiveness, Vyner used sometimes to go to Nora's, and tell her his thoughts and fancies, as we can only tell them to a few. Behind her gold-rimmed glasses Lady Stainbrooke, with her blinking eyes would watch the painter, and she began more earnestly than ever to wish that Nora was married to Lord Seaforth. Therefore when the invitation came from Lady Seaforth to invite Nora to visit her at Ryecourt, Lady Stainbrooke urged her niece to go.

"The change will do you good," she said.

She meant it would be better if Nora were out of Mr. Vyner's way.

Nora told her "old friend, Mr. Vyner," of Lady Seaforth's invitation also.

"I think I am going down for a week into Dorsetshire to gather primroses, Walter," she said smiling. "Lady Seaforth is staying at an old country house, which belongs to a distant relation of hers, and she has invited me to go."

The painter suppressed a restless sigh, and walked up to the fireplace and stood looking absently at the flames.

He was thinking of a report which had crept into the society papers, and which Margaret had pointed out to his notice only on the previous day.

This report was that Nora was going to marry Lord Seaforth. It was a report openly enough discussed, and Seaforth was understood to be keeping out of the way until "his affairs were settled;" in fact until he married Crœsus's Widow, and thus obtained the money to settle them with.

"It is a very good thing for them both," said Margaret, in her practical way, after pointing out the report to Vyner. "He has rank and

she has money—I am very glad. It will be an advantage to us also, Walter, to visit Lady Seaforth, and I suppose she won't give us the cold shoulder when you and she are such old friends."

"No, I do not suppose she will," answered Vyner, and nothing more was said on the subject.

But as he stood gazing into Nora's fire, after she had told him she was thinking of going to visit Lady Seaforth, Vyner was wondering if the report were likely to be true. But something—a feeling to which he could not have given a name—prevented him from mentioning it to Nora.

Presently, however, he asked one question.

"Is the young lord there too, then?" he said.

"Oh, no," answered Nora, "he is in Paris—this is Lady Seaforth's letter," and she took up an open letter that she had been about to answer when Vyner came in. "Yes," she continued, after glancing at the letter, "Lord Seaforth is in Paris—he has gone there, I suppose, for change after his fever."

"I suppose so," said Vyner, and he made no

other remark, and after he left her, Nora sat down and accepted Lady Seaforth's invitation.

Nora's letter was delivered to Lady Seaforth at Ryecourt on the following day, and the same post that carried this letter carried another letter also, which her old servant, Mrs. Benson, had enclosed in a fresh envelope, and forwarded to Lady Seaforth.

This other letter was for Lord Seaforth. It was addressed to the South Kensington house, which was shut up, but Mrs. Benson went each evening to see if there were any letters in the box, and if there were, forwarded them to my lady.

Lady Seaforth looked at this letter—the letter addressed to her son—looked at the somewhat faint, delicate handwriting on the envelope, and then her pale face turned suddenly red. "Could it be?" she was thinking. "Could this wretched girl have written to Seaforth—written just now—when it was of such vital consequence that her very existence should be ignored? Could it be so?"

Lady Seaforth had fallen very low. She had lied to Strathearn; she had urged her son to marry for money, and forget all claims of honour

and conscience ; but she felt lower still this day. With trembling hands she opened her son's letter ; with shocked and startled eyes read the first line :—

"Murray," she read, "not for my own sake do I appeal to you—" She read no further. Hastily and tremblingly she restored the letter to its envelope ; hastily and tremblingly locked it securely away.

CHAPTER III.

JOANNAH'S CAPTURE.

A FEW days after this, Nora went on her visit to Ryecourt, and was received with the greatest cordiality by Lady Seaforth. Nora thought that Lady Seaforth looked a little worn, but she assured Nora she was perfectly well.

"And my son is almost quite well too, now," she added, smiling. "I am so thankful—a fever pulls a man down so terribly, and it was dreadful to see him so ill—and I hope his affairs will soon be put all right now."

She hid the skeletons that she had locked away in her closet very well, this proud lady. One of these skeletons (Nellie's letter to Seaforth) still lay securely hidden at Ryecourt when Nora arrived there. Perhaps my lady's face was a shade paler, and a pang of shame sometimes crossed her heart when she remembered this,

but on the whole she looked very well, and bore herself very bravely and pleasantly, considering the circumstances.

She took Nora all over the old house the day after Nora's arrival at Ryecourt, and smilingly told her again of Hugh Marchmont's stupid attachment to herself.

"It has made him so strange, I suppose," she said. "He lives here like a hermit, only he has every comfort around him. Then he has such wonderful ideas—I believe he thinks of nothing but what he imagines to be doing good, and he has pensioners of every description—he is a very odd person."

"He struck me last night as being a very interesting person," answered Nora. "I never saw such a benign and peaceful face, I think."

"Yes, that is so astonishing!" said Lady Seaforth, shrugging her shoulders. "What can make him look so contented?"

Something that Lady Seaforth had never sought for, and never found, in her worldly, unhappy life! She could not understand Hugh Marchmont—could not understand how the man, who once had been at her feet, could now placidly spend week after week under the same

roof with her, and never show the faintest wish or idea of resuming the old lover-like relationship between them.

And Lady Seaforth soon saw this After that first morning when they had breakfasted together, and when she had spoken of "circumstances which sometimes make us appear deceptive when our hearts are true," and when Hugh Marchmont had left her for his parson, she had made no further advances to him. She was too proud to woo any man—but she could not understand it. She was still handsome, and she was free now, and Hugh Marchmont had once loved her so deeply. Yet here was Hugh Marchmont unmoved, kind and placid, day by day, as if he were her grandfather!

Therefore, Lady Seaforth told Nora he was a very strange person, and really thought so. But Nora took quite a fancy to this grave-faced gentleman, who lived "imagining he was doing good." She understood him better than Lady Seaforth did; and after Hugh Marchmont's quiet, penetrating eyes had rested on the young widow's face for a day or two, he made a remark which greatly surprised and annoyed Lady Seaforth.

"I don't think your match-making will answer," he said, smiling. "Mrs. Trelawn is not the woman to marry Seaforth."

"And why, may I ask?" said Lady Seaforth angrily.

"You will see," said Hugh Marchmont, still smiling; and my lady felt very angry with herself, and very angry with her distant kinsman.

"I have been a fool to confide anything to him, he is so absurd," she thought. The reason she had confided or rather hinted her scheme to him about Nora, was when she wanted to borrow the money for her son to go to Paris, from Mr. Marchmont.

"It will be all right some day, Hugh," she had then said, smiling. "I look on Seaforth's marriage with Mrs. Trelawn as almost a settled thing. She is quite devoted to him, I am certain—if only Seaforth would settle."

Therefore she felt very angry with Mr. Marchmont, when he prophesied that her matrimonial scheme would end in disappointment.

"But Hugh is so absurd," she told herself; and she was more agreeable than ever during

the rest of the day after this conversation about Crœsus's Widow, for Lady Seaforth rarely showed her real feelings.

But while Nora was gathering cowslips and primroses on the grassy wolds round Ryecourt, and Lady Seaforth was standing by smiling and chatting, let us return to those in town whom the under current of life was drifting nearer to Lady Seaforth's path.

Her old lady's-maid, Mrs. Benson, had had more than one visit during this time from Joannah Brewis, who was most anxious to redeem her promise to Strathearn, and find out where Clayton was. But Mrs. Benson had been as reserved and mysterious during these visits as she had been when Joannah had first called to make inquiries about Clayton.

"I am not at liberty to say anything, Miss Brewis," at last she had told Joannah, and Joannah had sniffed indignantly.

"There's good cause of secrets, I dare say," she said. "For my part I'm straightforward, having nothing particular to hide!"

But Joannah felt very much aggrieved by finding that Mrs. Benson could "keep anything from her." She despised Mrs. Benson's mental

endowments, and had expected that Mrs. Benson would tell her anything she chose to ask; and when she found this was not the case, she felt extremely irate, and her temper grew so irascible that three maid-servants ran away from her in a week, and she received two summonses for wages, which she declared she would never pay "while alive."

But while she was in this irritable frame of mind, fortune suddenly favoured her. She was returning from a register-office one afternoon, just as it was turning dusk, when as she passed the corner of Belgrave Road her sharp eyes fell on the figure of a man, who was at that moment leaving the shop door of her friend, Mr. Benson, the chemist, the husband of Lady Seaforth's old lady's-maid.

Joannah looked at this man and at once recognised him. It was Clayton himself she felt sure; and it was Clayton. Lord Seaforth had not taken his servant to Paris with him when he went there, but had sent Clayton back to London when he quitted Ryecourt, and Clayton had been calling on Mrs. Benson when Joannah saw him.

No sleuth-hound ever felt a keener joy in

sighting his prey than Joannah felt at the sight of this man. Her eyes gleamed, her steps quickened, and yet she followed him warily, for she wanted him quite away from Mrs. Benson's ken before she attacked him.

But she never took her eyes off him. On went Clayton before, and on warily followed Joannah behind. Then suddenly she pounced upon him; fixing her long, thin fingers with a claw-like gripe upon his arm.

"And how do you find yourself this evening, Clayton?" she said with a triumphant giggle. "You've got home, then?"

"Ah! Miss Brewis," said Clayton, who felt a little startled, looking round, "is that you? Yes, I've got home."

"I'm glad I've met you," continued Joannah, still with her eyes eagerly gleaming and fixed on the man's face, "for I've something at my house I would like you to see—something that came for your lord as you call him—I fancy from a party we know who has disappeared; and, if you'll come with me, I'll put it into your hands, to forward as you please."

Clayton at once fell into Joannah's snare.

"What!" he said, "has anything come from

the poor young lady? I'm glad to hear it, Miss Brewis, and my lord will be glad too—I know that, for he's fretted terribly about this business. Is it a letter?"

"I'll show you when we get home," answered Joannah, grimly; and with alacrity Clayton turned with her, and a few minutes later was entering Miss Brewis's house.

"Kindly step into my little private parlour," said Joannah, as soon as she had closed the hall door. "I'll go and fetch what I meant in a moment or two, if you will stay here."

Innocently Clayton walked into Joannah's parlour, and swiftly Joannah ran upstairs. When she arrived at bedroom number three, her actions appeared a little extraordinary, for she instantly took the door-key out from the lock in the inside of the room, and placed it in the lock outside. Having done this, she glanced anxiously round the room, and snatched up a little ornament from the mantel-piece that she considered valuable, and put it in her pocket. Then assuming as bland an air as she could, though she could not help the cat-like and ferocious gleam in her green eyes, she descended the staircase and went into her parlour, where

Clayton was standing, looking thoughtfully out of the window.

"Now, Clayton," she said, "if you'll come upstairs with me, I'll show you what I mean."

"Certainly, Miss Brewis," said Clayton politely, and he followed Joannah upstairs, and walked into bedroom number three, when Joannah indicated that he was to do so.

But the moment he was inside the room Joannah shut the door after him, remaining herself outside, and before the astonished Clayton could turn round, he heard the door key turned, and saw at once that he was locked in.

"Why, Miss Brewis, are you going to make a prisoner of me?" he shouted through the door, wondering what Joannah could mean.

"Yes, young man," shouted Joannah grimly, in reply, "you'll stay where you are, till a party I know of arrives here to ask you some questions that I'll be bound he'll make you answer. It's no use you shaking the door or shouting—if you shout loud, and anyone hears you, I'll tell inquirers that you are a party waiting to be conveyed to the lunatic asylum, and, therefore, all your tantrums will only be considered natural."

"Come, Miss Brewis, this is a little too bad," said Clayton, shaking the handle of the door. "Let me out, my good lady, and I'll answer any question you wish to ask."

Joannah gave a sarcastic giggle.

"I daresay," she said, "but I prefer you inside; and inside you'll stay for the present. There's a Bible on the mantelpiece," she added, with another bitter giggle; "and I advise you to have a little quiet reading, for you'll have time, and may be it will improve your morals!" And having given this parting shot, Clayton heard Joannah descend the staircase.

In vain he shook the door, and opened the window and shouted for assistance. Joannah had secured him in a back bedroom, which looked upon her own back-premises, and there was no one apparently to be seen. Clayton, therefore, tried to resign himself, and sat down and began to consider what possibly could be Joannah's motive. He came to the conclusion it must be some of the creditors of his lord who had bribed Joannah to snare him, so that they might discover where his lordship was. He, therefore, waited fairly patiently for the first hour, expecting every moment to be released.

In the meanwhile, Joannah had not been idle. She had telegraphed to Strathearn to come at once to her house, and she was sitting impatiently downstairs awaiting his arrival.

But hour after hour passed away, and no Strathearn appeared. Strathearn, in fact, had gone out of town for a few hours, and thus had not immediately received Joannah's telegram. At nine o'clock, therefore, Joannah went upstairs to look after her captive.

"I say, young man," she shouted through the keyhole, "d'ye want any supper?"

"This is too much, really, Miss Brewis," answered Clayton, from inside; "a man can't stand such treatment, I can tell you. Supper, indeed! I'm starving, and would give anything for a drink o' beer. Do let me out, my dear lady, just for a glass o' beer, and then you can put me in again."

"I'd too much trouble to get you in, to try the experiment," shouted Joannah, now putting one of her green eyes to the keyhole to view her captive, who in the meanwhile had lighted the gas, having found a box of matches. "Oh! you've lit the gas, have you? Well, you seem pretty comfortable — and if you want any

supper, I'll slip a sandwich or two below the door, and for drink you'll find plenty of water in the bedroom jugs." And Joannah indulged herself in a giggle.

"But what on earth do you want with me, that you are keeping me here?" inquired Clayton.

"I want nothing with you," replied Joannah, in a virtuous tone, "and the party who does want something with you hasn't come; and till he does come you won't see the outside of the door I can promise you, young man! But I don't wish to deprive you of victuals, and you shall have ham and beef sandwiches to choose from in five minutes."

Joannah was as good as her word, and presently returned to the bedroom door with a plate of sandwiches.

"Come, young man," she said, "I've cut them myself, and you'll find them not like the choking articles some people call sandwiches —there's one through" (Joannah had by this time slid one of the sandwiches below the door) —"there's another—when you have finished these two, I'll pass in number three."

"But, my dear good lady, do give me a drop

to drink?" pleaded the unhappy Clayton from inside.

Upon this point, however, Joannah was obdurate.

"They say there's nothing so wholesome as water," she said, "and you've plenty of it. Now just you have another sandwich."

But Clayton was too angry to eat. He was just beginning to threaten Miss Brewis with all sorts of legal punishments for her illegal act, when a thundering rap and ring at the house door announced an arrival.

"That's the party, I'll be bound!" exclaimed Joannah, and she ran downstairs, and just entering the hall as she did so, found Strathearn.

"I've caught him, sir!" she said triumphantly. "I have him upstairs, safe under lock and key."

"Who? Clayton?" asked Strathearn eagerly.

"Clayton himself," answered Joannah. "I snared him. They've been too sharp for me they thought, but I've been too sharp for them for once! Ha, ha, ha!" And Joannah giggled with satisfaction.

Then Strathearn followed her upstairs, and as she unlocked the bedroom door Strathearn gave a harsh laugh.

"What! have you him here?" he said.

"There he is!" answered Joannah, throwing open the bedroom door. "I said I would catch him, and I've caught him—so now I'll leave you together."

Then Strathearn entered the room, and Clayton at once recognised him, and began dimly to understand the situation.

"Now, my man," said Strathearn, "I want a few words with you. I didn't tell that good lady, mind, to lock you up, but I asked her to try to find you, for I want some knowledge I believe you possess—and I am ready and willing to pay you handsomely for it."

Clayton bowed like a well-bred servant.

"Miss Brewis has certainly treated me very oddly, sir," he said, "and as for any information I possess—unless it's against my duty—I shall be very glad to give it to you."

"What do you mean by your duty?" asked Strathearn roughly. "Do you mean your duty to the man you call your master, Lord Seaforth, or do you mean your duty as an honest man?"

Clayton cast down his eyes.

"I have been a long time in the service of my lord, Mr. Campbell," he said.

"Exactly," said Strathearn; "and now I want to make it worth your while to quit his service. Look here, man!" he added, yet more roughly, and he walked forward close to Clayton —"I know something at least of your past life —I know you helped to deceive an innocent woman last August in Edinburgh; but I want to know something more than this, for which I am ready to pay you handsomely."

"You mean—" said Clayton, without lifting his eyes.

"I mean did Seaforth—the man you call your master—deceive her then or afterwards? I mean, was he married to her in Edinburgh, as she believed; or was that marriage a farce, as he told her it was before she disappeared?"

Still Clayton stood with his eyes cast down before the eager and excited Strathearn.

"If you will tell the truth, the exact truth mind ye, I will give you five hundred pounds," continued Strathearn.

Then Clayton lifted his eyes.

"Five hundred pounds," he repeated.

What visions this sum conjured up! He could retire from service — he could start a bar—he could get married—but, on the

other hand, could he betray his master?

"I've been uncommonly sorry for the poor young lady, sir," he said, presently, after considering both sides of the question; "uncommonly sorry, and so, I am sure, has my lord. But you see, my lord's in a terrible hole, sir—it's no secret we had an execution in the house, and the bailiffs were only got out by a party advancing the money, and this party my lord—"

But here Clayton paused—he began to think he was telling too much, and again he turned over both sides of the question in his own mind.

"If I hold my tongue," he thought, "my lord will likely marry the rich widow, and be on the swim again; but will this be worth five hundred pounds to me—five hundred pounds in cash—"

"Sir," he said aloud, "will you allow me to think the matter over? I am sure you will think no worse of me for wishing to act honourable to my lord; but then, on the other hand, the poor young lady is to be considered—and I'm sure when I thought she had gone and drowned herself I was almost as much upset as my lord."

"And you know nothing of her—nothing

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more?" asked Strathearn, in a faltering voice.

"Nothing, sir, on my honour," replied Clayton. "Nor does my lord. Since the day she ran out of this house, after she and my lord quarrelled, we have never seen or heard of her. But all the same, I think there's no reasonable doubt that she's alive, and well taken care of, for there's no doubt she was the young person who tried to throw herself from the Chelsea Bridge, and who was taken away by the lady in the carriage—but, of course, you've heard the whole story, sir?"

"Yes," answered Strathearn, briefly; "and now—when will you make up your mind to tell the truth?"

"Will you give me two days to consider, sir, what is best for me to do?" asked Clayton.

"Yes," again said Strathearn, and on this agreement they parted.

"He will tell," thought Strathearn, bitterly, as Clayton walked out of the room. "And I believe now, there is something in this marriage," he thought, yet more bitterly—he had offered a reward of five hundred pounds for knowledge that stabbed him like a sword.

CHAPTER IV.

HOPE DEFERRED.

In a neat, quiet little house, not far from Victoria Station, and close to one of the bridges, Nellie had now found a temporary home. The mistress of the house had been in the service of Mr. and Mrs. Barrett as well as her husband, and therefore Mrs. Tom Bertrim's recommendation was quite sufficient for Mrs. Moore, as Nellie's new landlady was called.

Nothing could exceed the kindness and delicacy with which Dossie Bertrim behaved to Nellie at this time. She paid for her lodgings a month in advance, and she put a sufficient sum into her hand for Nellie to live on for a much longer period; and she told Mrs. Moore that "her friend, Mrs. Murray" was the wife of an officer, who was abroad at present, and requested that Mrs. Moore would pay her every attention, "for my sake," added Dossie.

Mrs. Moore smiled kindly in reply. She had known this sweet young woman, who was asking her to be kind to her "friend," since she was a little child. Dossie Barrett had been almost as much loved by the servants at her father's house as she had been by every one else. "Every one is always so kind to me," she used to say, but the truth was that she was so kind that it was impossible not to love her. Therefore, Mrs. Moore gladly promised to do her best for her "dear young lady's" friend. And Dossie filled the quaint little vases about the room with flowers, and brought grapes and other luxuries for the poor drooping invalid whom she had confided to her old servant's care.

But there are some ills no earthly kindness can cure, and it's vain to try to heal a broken heart.

"It's sad to see her, ma'am," Mrs. Moore confided to Dossie; "there she sits all day, and seems to notice nothing—I fear there's something wrong with her that will not mend."

It was at this time that Nellie wrote her second letter to Lord Seaforth—the letter my lady hid away at Ryecourt; and while my lady

was smiling and gathering primroses with Nora Trelawn, the broken-hearted young creature who had written it, was watching for each post, and listening for a footfall that never came.

Day by day passed away, each more dreary than the last. It was wet spring weather, and the rain came pattering down on the streets, and the sky was grey and cloudy.

"Will he never come—never, never—" she kept moaning. And yet she could not believe that he would thus utterly forsake her. In the letter that Lady Seaforth had hidden away, Nellie had appealed in simple and touching language, "not for my sake, Murray," she had written, and surely, surely he would not resist this helpless cry!

Yet he never came, and no letter came. We know how this was, but the unhappy girl did not know. She had addressed her letter to Lord Seaforth, at the house at South Kensington, where she knew he lived with his mother; and as this letter was never returned to her, and never answered, what could she think?

She waited a fortnight — fourteen weary, weary days—and then she thought she would write again. She must do something she

knew; she could not go on living at the expense of strangers like the Bertrims, however kind and good these strangers might be. Her letter might have been lost—Murray must be away, she decided—and so she wrote again.

Then came other weary days and nights of suspense—sometimes of despair. Yet she did not turn to death now, as she had turned in her first dark agony, when she had learned that all her love and all her hopes had been given to a lie. Other thoughts stirred in her heart—perhaps other hopes. But her second letter shared the same fate as her first. Again Mrs. Benson enclosed "a letter for my lord" to my lady; and my lady looked at this second letter, shivered, grew red, then pale—and locked it away beside the first.

Nora Trelawn was still at Ryecourt when this second letter was forwarded there. She had enjoyed her visit, and the fresh country air had brought back some of her early bloom; and Lady Seaforth, writing to her son in Paris, told him that "Mrs. Trelawn was looking absolutely charming;" and she urged her son to come over and join them without delay.

This second letter, therefore, came like a shock

to Lady Seaforth. She was expecting her son, hoping for him—and yet she grew afraid when this second letter was enclosed by Benson. She thought even of writing to tell him not to come to Ryecourt—but then it was such a chance—living in this lonely, out-of-the-way spot, with the richest independent woman in England; in town it could never be like this, even if Seaforth could be in town, which his circumstances (as his mother well knew) entirely prevented.

She would risk it, decided Lady Seaforth, but this second letter somewhat shattered her nerves. She did not open it; she hid it away, but she could not forget it. "The wretched girl" who had written it, as she inwardly designated Nellie, was in the meantime waiting and watching. She waited a week, and then one day, thickly veiled, she crept out of doors and drove nearly to the square in South Kensington, where Lady Seaforth lived. Then she left the cab, and crawled wearily to the very square. The house was shut up; Nellie looked up, saw this, and turned deadly faint. She was still very weak and ill, and it was all she could do to totter back to her cab, and wearily leaning

back in it, she returned to her present home.

That closed house seemed to tell its own story to the unhappy girl. So he was away—most probably abroad—and what was she to do?

"Father! father!" the next moment broke from her white, parched lips. This piteous cry came almost without thought, but it brought a new thought. She would go to her father. She clasped her hands, and recalled his constant love. Would he turn from her now—now when she was quite forsaken—perhaps about to die? No, she would go to this last refuge. Her father would take her in and shield her if he could.

"It is not for my own sake," she moaned piteously, pressing her hot hands against her burning brow. Oh! the shame, the anguish of that moment! To go back dishonoured, heart-broken—to face Margaret's cold looks, perhaps hear her hard, cold words!

But she must do something—she must go! If Seaforth had forsaken her, if he really meant to marry this other woman, it was only right that she should try to seek protection for her unborn babe. Perhaps her father, perhaps Vyner, might persuade him to do her justice

for the child's sake. For herself—what matter was it? She had lost everything when she found out she had given all her love, all her hopes, to a lie.

And as she thought and thought, her miserable heart began to take some comfort from the memory of her father's love. His dear face seemed to shine out of darkness, benignant to her still. Yes, she would go to him, but she was too ill and weak to go that day.

She was so prostrate and overcome indeed that her landlady, Mrs. Moore, privately wrote to her "young lady at Castlewood Lodge," as she still called Dossie Bertrim, to tell her of Mrs. Murray's state; for Dossie had left particular orders that Mrs. Moore was to write to her if she saw any change in Mrs. Murray.

"The poor young lady looks worse and worse to my mind," wrote Mrs. Moore. "She drove out for a short time to-day, and returned quite overcome. She has done nothing but moan almost ever since she came in," and so on.

This letter was delivered the next morning at Castlewood Lodge, and caused the sweet, kind-hearted young mistress there considerable pain. She would have driven into town

at once to see after the unfortunate girl whom she had befriended; but they were expecting some friends to lunch that day at Castlewood, and as it was more than fifteen miles out of town, Dossie had not time to drive in and return before the luncheon hour to receive her guests.

Therefore she put off her proposed visit to Mrs. Moore's until the next day; and on this small and seemingly accidental pivot, a great change came to Nellie's hapless life.

For, after a night's rest, Nellie still kept to her resolve to go to her father. She rose about ten o'clock, and trembling, shaking in every limb, she prepared to go out. She put on a black dress and a long black cloak and veil, and would not listen to Mrs. Moore's counsel and advice.

"You are not fit to go out, indeed, Mrs. Murray," urged the good woman, looking with compassionate eyes at the white, quivering, agitated face. "Do wait, please, my dear, until my young lady comes—I'm sure she'll go with you if you have any business that requires looking after—for you're not fit to go out by yourself—and for that matter, if you like, I'll go with you."

No, Nellie must go, and go alone. She had nerved herself up for the interview with her father. Did some recollection of the Prodigal Son — of the pitiful cry, "Father, I have sinned,"—pass dimly through her mind? And the old man "fell upon his neck and kissed him." Was there such love in store for her? She had forsaken her father—she was going back to him, crushed, heartbroken—but still he would kiss her, he would kiss her—Nellie was sure of this.

So she made ready to go. It was now about eleven o'clock, and Mrs. Moore called a cab for her, and exerting all her strength Nellie tried to appear calm, and ordered the driver to stop at the Metropolitan Railway Station nearest to her father's house. This station was quite close to the street where Major Blythe lived, and Nellie thought she would have strength to walk this short distance.

She closed her eyes as she was being driven along; she tried to picture her father's grief—she felt thankful he was blind. Then the cab stopped with a jerk, and Nellie looked up, and recognised the familiar railway station. She was close now, she thought—close—and she

drew a long breath, and feebly got out of the cab and paid her fare.

She felt weaker than she had thought she was, as she slowly crossed the street and turned into the one where her father lived. Surely, there was a greater crowd than usual in it? A crowd, chiefly gathered lower down—lower down, where her father lived. Nellie tottered on, her eyes fixed on this crowd. She neared it; suddenly she saw why it was there. It was a funeral—a hearse and two mourning coaches standing—oh, God! before her father's door! Nellie gave a half cry, and then a ghastly smile. How foolish she was, she thought—it was only in the street—she would ask who it was.

She turned to a bystander, a respectable-looking elderly woman—

"Whose—" she faltered, for her clammy tongue seemed to refuse its office.

"It's Major Blythe," answered the woman. "Ay, poor man, he's lived in the street a long time, and they say he's died of a broken heart—he never looked up after his young daughter ran away."

As the woman spoke—just after she had mentioned the dead man's name—the funeral

procession began to move. On came the black horses and the nodding plumes; on—then there was a sort of stir in the crowd and a cry. A woman had fallen down—she fell just as the hearse passed her, flinging her arms forward, and one of the black horses swerved, and its hoof struck down on the woman's extended hand.

A moment later and a policeman had snatched her up from beneath the horse's feet.

"What is the matter?" asked a gentleman, putting his head out from one of the mourning coaches, for he had noticed the stir in the crowd without seeing the cause.

"One of the horses has kicked a woman, that is all," answered a man standing by; and so the funeral procession moved on, and the woman who had fallen and been injured was carried by the policeman into the railway station.

They laid her on a couch and put back her veil, and cut the glove off her crushed and broken hand. As they were doing this the policeman who had picked her up was attentively looking at her features. Then he retired to one side of the waiting-room, and drew some memorandums out of his note-book. After he

had read these he returned to the woman, and gently moved back her fair hair from her pallid brow. Beneath this fair hair was a red scar, and as the policeman saw this he smiled and made haste to get a cab to convey the woman to the nearest hospital.

A quarter of an hour later she was carried into the accident ward of Middlesex Hospital, and her hand was dressed and every possible attention paid to her. But the policeman who had brought her there did not linger to inquire after her condition. He placed her in the hands of the proper authorities, and then hastily left her. He thought he had recognised her, from the printed description, as the woman for whose discovery two hundred pounds had been offered, and he hurried away in the hope of getting the reward.

CHAPTER V.

THE WATCHER.

About two o'clock on the same day, Strathearn, visibly agitated, and accompanied by an inspector of police and the policeman who had conveyed the woman to Middlesex Hospital, were admitted into the accident ward for the purpose of identifying her.

She was lying on one of the narrow beds, her dress loosened at her throat, and a nurse was bathing her brow. At the foot of the bed stood a surgeon, who looked round as the policeman and Strathearn approached, and warningly held up his hand.

"Keep very quiet," he said, the next minute; "she is very low—she must not be disturbed."

Then Strathearn stood silently looking at her, his face pale and stern.

"You are right," he said, a moment later,

to the policeman, "it is she—you shall have your reward."

Yet he scarcely could believe this, even as he said the words. The woman who lay there had a worn, pallid face, and her uninjured hand, which was lying on the coverlet, was thin and wasted. But for the red mark on her brow, and the fair soft hair, Strathearn might still have been uncertain that he had found at last the woman he had sought so long.

"You know her, then?" said the surgeon now addressing Strathearn.

"Yes," he answered in a husky voice, and for a moment he looked away down the hospital ward. "How long," he said the next moment, trying to steady his voice, "how long will it be before she can be moved—before I can take her to her home?"

The surgeon hesitated.

"Perhaps she would be better at home," he said; "but she will require great care. Her hand is very much cut, and one of the fingers broken; but the injury is not serious—it is the shock to the system that is serious."

"Could she go in an hour?" asked Strathearn.

"Better say two hours," said the surgeon;

"by that time she will revive—but I should not like her to leave here without a doctor."

"Will you go with her, then?" said Strathearn; and as he spoke, and before the doctor could answer, Nellie moaned slightly and put her hand to her brow, which the nurse was still bathing, and the next moment opened her large blue eyes.

Strathearn moved his hand for the policemen to go, so that the sight of them might not startle her, and then he made a step forward, and gently took her hand.

"Are you better?" he said. "You know me, don't you?"

The blue eyes that he remembered so bright—now so pathetic and full of pain—rested on Strathearn's face.

"Strathearn!" she said, feebly.

"Yes—hush! you must not speak—you must get home—try to take a little rest, and then I'll get you home," said Strathearn, in a low, hurried voice.

"Yes—take me home," said Nellie, and she closed her eyes again, as if she were too weary to speak.

The surgeon put his hand upon her pulse,

and whispered something to the nurse, who at once proceeded to administer a restorative.

Then he beckoned to Strathearn, and spoke with him a few minutes aside.

"You are right," he said, "she would be best at home; get her home as soon as possible, and I will go with her, until you get another doctor to take charge of the case—it is a very serious one."

Strathearn nodded his head. Scarcely could he suppress, before the surgeon, the overwhelming anguish and bitterness of his soul. But he hardly spoke.

"I will go at once," he said; and he went, flinging himself into the first cab he saw, and ordering the driver to drive as fast as he could go, to Miss Brewis's house in Belgrave Road.

When he got there, Joannah received him with her sour smile, which she mollified as much as possible in honour of Strathearn. But her smile changed to a look of consternation when she glanced at his stern, excited face.

"What is the matter?" she asked in her quick way.

"I have found her," answered Strathearn, his deep voice broken by his strong emotion,

"and—and I believe she is dying, Miss Brewis. Will you take her in?"

Joannah stood with uplifted hands.

"Dying!" she said. "Never! the poor young lost creature to have come to this!"

"Will you take her in?" repeated Strathearn. "You will be kind to her—she needs a woman's kindness—though, by heavens!" (and he crushed his foot down upon the floor and breathed hard) "she has a man to avenge her wrongs."

"I'll have no murders here!" said Joannah, positively. "If this poor forsaken creature wants a home, I'm not the woman to refuse it, though it is just the beginning of the season, and I had two good offers of lets to-day. But she shall come here if you wish, Mr. Campbell, whatever it costs me, if you will promise to commit no violence on my premises."

"You are a good woman," said Strathearn, gratefully. "Thank you for taking her in; and I'll promise whatever you like."

"As for being a good woman," said Joannah, dubiously, though she felt the compliment, "I don't say I'm good, though I am not exactly bad, for I'm honest, and that's something when

there's so many female impostresses going about the world."

"Will you come with me now, then, to fetch her here?" asked Strathearn, in his quick, impatient way. "She is very ill—I would like you to go with me, and I will take you in the cab I came in."

"Not in one of those hansoms!" said Joannah. "They're are not respectable for females, in my opinion, and I could not—no, not even in the case of a death—be seen in one of them. But if you'll get a four-wheeled cab I'll go."

"Very well," answered Strathearn, and he ran out of the house, and before Joannah (as she declared) had "time to turn round" he was back again with a four-wheeled cab, ready to take her to Middlesex Hospital.

"What a man you are!" said Joannah, who really had not had time to get ready, "you fluster one so!"

"Never mind," said Strathearn, "come along;" and he carried off Joannah, who kept calling directions out of the cab window to some of her household until they were fairly out of the street.

But Joannah's heart melted within her when

she looked at the death-like face of the young patient lying in the accident ward of Middlesex Hospital.

Joannah coughed, turned away her head, and then drew her handkerchief hastily out of her pocket, and tried to hide that she was forced to wipe away a pitying tear. But the next minute she tapped Strathearn sharply on the arm.

"I say," she half whispered, "don't you mind what I said before we came—if you see that villain I would thrash him within an inch of his life, if I were you; and I'd like to see it!"

Strathearn only answered by a stern smile. He was standing looking at Nellie with quivering lips, and then he bent down and very gently took her hand.

As he did so, Nellie opened her eyes and gazed wildly round. The surgeon had administered chloroform before he had dressed her wounded hand, and the powerful drug still mercifully dulled her senses. But she vaguely recognised Strathearn, and knew Miss Brewis also, and seemed to understand that she was not at home, and that they wished to take her there.

"Yes, I will go," she said, raising herself up. But she was quite unable to walk, and was carried to the cab, apparently relapsing into a state of semi-insensibility almost immediately after she was lifted into it.

And in the same state of semi-insensibility she was carried into Miss Brewis's house, and laid on the bed from which she had fled that night in her dark and bitter despair. But she was not left now. Miss Brewis was not a woman to do things by halves, and for the next two or three hours she never left Nellie's side. Then the unhappy girl grew terribly ill, and all that night her life hung upon a thread. Strathearn called repeatedly to make inquiries, but towards the pale hours of the morning the wakeful and watchful Joannah heard outside in the quiet streets a continuous tramp, tramp of footsteps backwards and forwards before her door.

Suddenly an idea struck her, and she went to one of the windows and gently opened it, and stretched out her long throat to see who it was. The lamplight below, as he passed it, fell on the pale, stern face of the watcher, and then Joannah saw it was Strathearn. A feeling of pity, nay of absolute sympathy, for the man's deep,

strong, and unreturned attachment rose in Joannah's virginal heart.

"Humph!" she muttered to herself, as she gently closed the window, and drew in her long neck, "that's a kind o' love worth having. Most of men would be snoring and grunting in their beds at this time o' night if their lawful wives were dying around them. Poor man—and it's all wasted." And Joannah sighed and looked at the unconscious sufferer moaning on the bed.

But Joannah was so touched that she crept downstairs and softly opened the street door, and the next time Strathearn passed it she beckoned him into the house.

"Come in," she whispered. "No, no, she's not any worse." This latter remark was in answer to the gleam of inquiring agony in Strathearn's eyes. "But, come in, and lie on the dining-room couch, and if there's any change I'll let you know."

"Thank you," said Strathearn, for he was weary and chill; and Joannah observing this, lit the fire, drew out some of her cherished bottles from the cupboard, and otherwise saw after Strathearn's comfort.

"There!" she said; "now lie down, and—well, on a stretch—I'll put the sofa quilt over you, though I never did such a thing for a man before." And, in hot haste, Joannah flung the sofa quilt over Strathearn, keeping, however, at a considerable distance from the tall Scotchman as she did so.

"Thank you again," said Strathearn, wearily, and he pulled a cushion under his head, and closed his eyes, and presently fell asleep. He was physically exhausted by the strong mental strife that all through the day had racked his heart. So he fell asleep, and dreamed of the white house in the Glen of Strathearn, and of the stern dead father who had lived there, brooding over real or fancied wrongs. Then somehow, misty and indistinct, he saw a fair face, and the green mountain steep where he had first seen Nellie. The sunlight was quivering on the water, as it had quivered then—the boat was moored in the little bay—

He awoke with a start; he looked up, and saw the face of Joannah, who looked pale and agitated.

"What is the matter?" he said, starting to his feet. "Is she worse?"

"Yes," answered Joannah, sternly and solemnly, "and I awoke you, sir, for you must go at once and get that Clayton to tell you where the villain is, and bring him here to do her justice before she dies."

CHAPTER VI.

WOOING AT RYECOURT.

Ryecourt stood on a grassy slope ; and broad, moss-grown stone steps, with a moss-grown stone balustrade on each side, lead up this slope to the terrace in front of the house. On these steps one sunny afternoon, Nora Trelawn was sitting with a book lying open on her lap, though she was not reading, but gazing vaguely at the quiet country scene spread out before her.

Presently there was a little rustle below in a clump of evergreens close to the foot of the steps, where Nora sat, and two rabbits ran across the grass close to her, evidently very much at their ease. They glanced at Nora with their bright brown eyes, nibbled a delicate blade or two, and then scampered away. Nora looked after them vaguely, as she had looked vaguely

at the still country scene before they appeared. She in truth was not thinking of anything around her; she was thinking of her past life; wondering what she ought to do in the days that were yet to come.

She had understood what her aunt Lady Stainbrooke meant her to understand, when she had urged her to go to Ryecourt. Nora understood what her aunt called her "hint" more quickly, because she was conscious how strong was the interest still with which she regarded her old love. And she knew also that Vyner's married life was an unhappy one. He had never told her this quite plainly; in fact, they never mentioned Margaret's name in their long and otherwise confidential conversations. But once or twice when the dark spirit had been on Vyner's soul, he had told Nora he "was about weary of it all," and Nora had understood what made him weary. He was married to a woman whom he did not love and with whom he had no sympathetic thoughts; and it was a trying position—Nora thought this now with a sigh, as she sat on the stone steps at Ryecourt—to be the intimate friend of an unhappy and dissatisfied married man.

Yet Margaret might have heard almost every word which had passed between them since Vyner's marriage. True, she would not have liked to hear—no wife would have liked to hear—that Vyner "was about weary of it all." But he had rarely spoken such words as these. He was not the man to speak them. He was reserved as a rule about his feelings, and it was only when he was very deeply moved that the floodgates of his really passionate nature were permitted to pour forth.

And his intercourse with Nora, to all outward seeming, was simply friendly. He told her about his work—talked to her as men and women only talk to those who can understand them—but after the affair of the picture of "My Eve," which he had given her, he rarely, if ever, even alluded to their early affection. Such subjects were, in truth, tacitly avoided between them. They talked of the present, and not of the past. Yet, between them, that past was always really present. Vyner, looking at his picture of "Eve," hanging on Nora's softly-tinted drawing-room wall, could scarcely forget the sweet maiden he had wooed in the Warbrooke meadows. And could Nora forget

the handsome painter—the lover of her youth—because between them now stood the cold shadow of a tardily-fulfilled duty? Both, however, recognised this duty, and it was an acknowledged element in their daily lives. But it was a dangerous position; and Nora, wishing to be a good woman—wishing to walk in the straight path—and to live a life free from blame and reproach, had thought more than once lately, if it would not be well that she herself should marry again, and thus virtually put an end to a friendship, which at best brought often pain.

And while thinking thus, once or twice, the image of Lord Seaforth had flitted across her mind. This was only natural. Circumstances had, apparently, thrown her into great intimacy with Lady Seaforth. And Lady Seaforth—charming, graceful, and with all the ease of manner which her birth and position gave her—had obtained a sort of unconscious influence over Nora. Though the elder woman belonged to a different class, the wealth of the younger woman bridged over this social distinction, and placed Nora above her former acquaintances. And to these former acquaintances Nora owed

very little gratitude, They had cut and snubbed her at Warbrooke in the sad days of her father's bankruptcy; they had smiled upon her when she was rich John Trelawn's young wife; and they had gone down on their knees to her, virtually, when she had, for a brief time, returned to her native town as Crœsus's Widow.

And Nora had seen all these changes very plainly, for vanity did not blind her eyes to the truth, as it blinded Margaret's. And she now saw, also, that Lady Seaforth wished her to marry her son, and she knew quite well why her ladyship wished this. Lord Seaforth was poor, and Nora was rich; Lord Seaforth had position to offer, and Nora had none, so the bargain was about equal, thought Nora, with a somewhat sad smile.

For it was but a bargain after all. Nora had no heart to give—she had given it all once—and her love had brought but pain and sorrow to her. She must not think of that love now; she was done with love, she told herself, and it would be well if she could marry and forget all about the old days—the old, fond, foolish dreams and hopes.

Again Nora sighed. Sitting there, she un-

consciously began to recall the past; the very past, she was mentally declaring to herself, that she must not think of. She shut her eyes—she was at Warbrooke, and the evening haze was rising over the uncut meadows—she heard the painter's voice—the words that had echoed and echoed through her heart from those brief hours to this.

Only for a moment or two she indulged herself. Then she opened her eyes, gave herself a little shake, and lifted her book, and tried to forget her own romance by reading someone else's. As she read on, the profound stillness around her was broken by the distant sound of carriage wheels. Hugh Marchmont had not many visitors. He in fact disliked visitors, and as this was well known, the people in the neighbourhood rarely troubled him. He was pronounced by common report to be an amiable but eccentric man, and he was quite agreeable to be called eccentric. Still, Nora naturally supposed that some visitor by chance had arrived when she heard the sound of the carriage wheels coming nearer and nearer, and then finally stop, after the carriage had evidently entered the court-yard at the back of the house.

A few minutes later Lady Seaforth stepped out of one of the drawing-room windows, which opened upon the terrace just behind where Nora was sitting, and came down and joined her.

Nora looked round with a smile as she approached, and she noticed that Lady Seaforth's usual pale, clear complexion was slightly flushed.

"Who do you think has arrived—quite unexpectedly arrived?" asked Lady Seaforth rather quickly and nervously.

"Indeed, I cannot tell," answered Nora, still smiling.

"Murray" said Lady Seaforth. "I am so surprised. But here he is to answer for himself."

As Lady Seaforth spoke, Lord Seaforth appeared at the open drawing-room window, and as Nora looked round he came forward, and took off his travelling cap.

Nora felt that she blushed. She had been thinking of this young lord but a few minutes ago, and she felt rather uncomfortable when he thus unexpectedly presented himself before her.

"I—am quite surprised to see you," she

said, rising from her seat on the stone step, and holding out her hand. "I hope you are quite well now?"

"Yes, quite well," answered Lord Seaforth. "And I need not ask how you and my mother are—nothing like country life, eh?" And Seaforth gave his light laugh.

But though he said he was well, he looked far from well. He looked haggard and worn, and his manner somehow gave you the impression of a man who was ill at ease.

"I do not think he looks very well," said his mother, glancing at him with an uneasy look in her proud, blue eyes. "We must take care of him, Mrs. Trelawn, and make him stay in this fine air for a little while."

"And what have you two been doing here to amuse yourselves?" asked Lord Seaforth, looking at Nora.

Nora laughed.

"I have been gathering primroses," she said, "and all sorts of wild flowers, they are so lovely about here—and—what else have we done, Lady Seaforth?"

"Well, you have done what I could not do, even to please my old friend Mr. Marchmont,"

smiled Lady Seaforth. "She has been going among Hugh's poor, Murray, and he tells me doing no end of good." And Lady Seaforth shrugged her shoulders.

"You don't like poor people, mother?" said Seaforth half bitterly.

"No," answered Lady Seaforth, candidly, "I confess I don't—we may as well make the best ofth is life, and enjoy it if we can."

"Yes, if we can—there's the rub!" said Seaforth.

"We must not expect everything," said Lady Seaforth gravely, "but, how stupid of me! I had almost forgotten in the pleasure of seeing you, Murray, that I have an appointment this afternoon with Hugh Marchmont. He is going to show me some plans or other (and again Lady Seaforth shrugged her shoulders) and I must humour him! So for the present, good-bye to you both." And Lady Seaforth turned and went towards the house in her usual stately, graceful fashion.

Seaforth looked after her, and then gave a little, bitter laugh.

"You know all about the old love by this time, I suppose?" he said, cynically, to Nora.

"Hugh Marchmont and my mother were once, I am told, the most devoted of lovers—yet you hear how she speaks of him now! It's the fashion, isn't it, to make out that women have more feeling than men? I believe it's an utter mistake!"

"People do not always show their feelings," said Nora.

"Pardon me, but as a rule, I think women do—they show them, and easily forget them—that's my experience." And Seaforth gave an uneasy sigh.

Nora smiled a little sadly.

"We do not agree in our opinions, then," she said. "I think that most of women do not care to show their real feelings—and do not easily forget them." And Nora cast down her eyes and a faint colour stole over her face.

"Perhaps!" said Seaforth, moodily enough, and he sat down on the stone steps as he spoke, and taking up a pebble shied it at a thrush on the grass below.

"How can you be so cruel?" said Nora. "You might have hit the poor bird."

"And so happily ended its earthly troubles.

Are you a philosopher, Mrs. Trelawn?"

"I am afraid not," answered Nora, smiling.

"To be one, I suppose," continued Seaforth, "means to take a wise and rational view of everything; put our feelings, etc., into our pockets, and make the best of the situation, whatever it is. That is modern social philosophy, isn't it?"

"Indeed, I do not know," laughed Nora.

"Nor I," said Seaforth. "But d'ye know why I came here, Mrs. Trelawn?" he added, turning away his head.

"No—how should I know?"

"To see you," said Seaforth, with a certain hardness and defiance of manner, which, when he forced himself to say anything, he unconsciously assumed. "My mother wrote and told me you were here—and she had told me something else—something that cut me horribly in spite of my philosophy, I can tell you—that you advanced a certain sum of money on a very pressing emergency, when I was ill."

"Do not name it," said Nora, blushing deeply. "It is nothing—I was only too glad."

"You are most kind and generous," said

Seaforth, still without looking at Nora, but with a ring of real feeling in his voice.

"Do not name it, please," again said Nora, almost entreatingly. "See, look at that rabbit there, peeping his 'bonny brown head' out below yon great holly! And so you don't like country life, Lord Seaforth?"

Nora spoke quickly and disjointedly—she wanted Seaforth to say nothing more about the money.

Then Seaforth rose to his feet, and looked in Nora's blushing face with some earnestness.

"I have not liked country life, Mrs. Trelawn," he said, "because—well, I'll tell you the truth —I've been a bad man, and one thinks more in the country, and I do not often care to think."

"You are young," said Nora gently, and with some sweetness and interest in her manner, "and you have plenty of time to be a good man yet."

"If I had a good woman to help me," said Seaforth, and Nora nervously turned away. She did not want any more of Seaforth's confidences just then.

But this conversation was but the first of many such conversations. Nora and Seaforth were

constantly thrown with each other during the next few days, which happened to be bright sunshiny spring ones, and they wandered together on the grassy wolds round Ryecourt, until Hugh Marchmont began to think he had been wrong in his estimation of the young widow's character.

"She is dazzled by his title, I suppose, poor young woman," thought the gentle, philosophic Hugh.

"I hope, I trust, it will all come right," almost prayed Lady Seaforth, watching her son and Nora from her bedroom windows, and then glancing uneasily at a certain despatch box in which lay hidden away two letters, whose presence there were as skeletons at a feast.

She could not forget these letters. Looking sometimes at her son's worn, anxious face, she could not but remember the sad story that the letters no doubt referred to, and a nameless dread of the consequences of her own act oppressed her, in spite of her strong hope that Nora was now really going to marry her son.

Seaforth made very little pretence in these days to Nora of being other than he was.

"I am a ruined man, you know," he told

her, and this frankness gained more from Nora than the most garbled description of his circumstances could have done. She, in fact, knew he was a ruined man; knew why his mother wished him to marry her; but she felt sorry and she felt sad as she listened to the young lord's melancholy words.

"I have wasted my life," was the usual text of his conversation. He was, in truth, for ever crying *peccavi*. And Nora felt sorry for him. She liked him—perhaps she could have loved him—if a shadow face, a sad, reproachful face, had not flitted before her mental vision even while she listened to Seaforth's somewhat sombre words.

At last one day, under an avenue of budding elms, Seaforth spoke.

"I must leave here soon," he said almost abruptly, his ordinarily smooth careless manner having rather changed of late, "and—I want to ask you a question, Mrs. Trelawn—before I go."

"Yes," said Nora, and she blushed and cast down her eyes.

"I am not worthy to ask it," continued Seaforth. "I do not deserve the love of a

woman like you ; but if you will look over my many faults—if you will forgive my shortcomings—you, you would make me very happy."

Seaforth knew these last words were not quite true, as he faltered them forth. But when a man is asking a woman to marry him he does not always speak the truth. And, to do the young lord justice, he really liked Nora, and, but for the shadow that lay athwart his life, he could undoubtedly have cared yet more deeply for her. So, as he spoke, there was a certain ring of earnestness in his voice that Nora understood.

"It is not entirely for my money," she thought ; but for a moment or two she made no answer to Seaforth's words.

"Well," he said presently, "will you give me any hope ?"

Then Nora looked up ; looked at the handsome though worn face of the young man by her side, and nervously and with much embarrassment she said :

"I—I scarcely know what to say, Lord Seaforth—I like you very much—but—"

"Are you afraid to trust me ?" asked Seaforth.

"It is not that—indeed it is not that—but I have not thought of this. Will you give me time to think?"

"Most certainly; as I said, Mrs. Trelawn, I cannot expect a woman like you to care for a graceless fellow like myself, but perhaps in time—"

"Yes," said Nora, and she smiled, and as she smiled, Seaforth ventured to take her hand.

"Do not be angry with me," he said. "I will try—yes, if you will trust me, I will try to make you happy—try to deserve you, and be a good man for your sake."

. . . . . .

The two stood, hand-in-hand, beneath the budding elms. The sun came shining through the branches, and the shadows fell around them, and they were silent—both thinking of the past. At that moment there flitted through the glinting sunrays a white vision before Seaforth's eyes. It stood there, pale and indistinct, and yet he saw it, and grew white and cold. And before Nora's eyes, too, rose a shadow—the shadow of her old dear love—of Vyner, "the husband of another woman now," she thought an instant later, almost bitterly; and

she turned to smile on the young lord who had just asked her to be his wife, and as she did so, she saw the change in Seaforth's face.

"Are you not well?" she asked, almost anxiously.

With an effort, Seaforth roused himself.

"I get these sudden chills," he said, with a shiver, "ever since I was ill."

"I am so sorry," said Nora, and Seaforth smiled, and together they walked towards the house, and on the terrace they met Lady Seaforth.

Something in Nora's manner made Lady Seaforth look quickly and eagerly in her face. Nora was conscious of this scrutiny, and she blushed, and made some excuse to go at once into the house, and the mother and son were thus left alone.

Then Lady Seaforth looked eagerly at Seaforth.

"Have you asked her, Murray?" she said.

Murray nodded his head, but made no other answer to his mother's anxious question.

"And has she accepted you? What did she say?" continued Lady Seaforth, yet more anxiously.

"She did not refuse me, at least," said Seaforth; and Lady Seaforth clasped her son's hand, and slid her arm through his.

"My dear, my dear!" she said, while tears swelled in her proud blue eyes, "you have made me too happy. Oh! Murray, I am so glad!"

"Mind, she did not accept me—she only did not say no," said Seaforth, trying to speak lightly.

"That is enough," answered the proud, fond mother. "It is all right; I am sure, Murray, that now it will all come right."

And so sure was Lady Seaforth of this, that, before the dinner hour, she told her kinsman Hugh, "that it was settled between Seaforth and Mrs. Trelawn." Her kinsman Hugh smiled good-naturedly when he heard the news, and told Lady Seaforth that if it pleased her, he was very glad.

"Yet you said it would not be, Hugh!" said Lady Seaforth with some triumph.

"You have been right, then," answered Hugh Marchmont, still smiling; and as he turned away he owned to himself that he felt a little surprised.

"Poor little woman," he thought, "what a sad fate it is to one of her sex to be rich."

And during dinner he looked once or twice rather pityingly at the "poor little woman." Nora looked nervous and not particularly happy, for Seaforth, when they returned to the drawing-room after dinner was over, seated himself by her side, and altogether marked by his manner and attentions that he considered himself an accepted lover.

While they were sitting thus — Seaforth lounging by Nora's side, playing with her fan —an unusual stir and noise, as of a sudden arrival, was heard outside the drawing-room door

"Who can it be, I wonder?" said Hugh Marchmont to Lady Seaforth.

"Extraordinary occurrence in life at Rye-court," laughed Seaforth, with his light laugh, "an arrival!"

The laugh had not died on his lips when the drawing-room door opened, and Strathearn, pale and stern, entered. He looked round, his eyes fell on Seaforth, lounging by Nora's side. He crossed the room, and laid his hand with a fierce clutch on Seaforth's shoulder.

"Come with me," he said, in his strong, harsh voice; "your wife is dying—she sent me to bring you before she dies."

CHAPTER VII.

"THE WORST DROP OF BITTERNESS."

As Strathearn spoke, Seaforth sprang to his feet.

"My God!" he said, "what do you mean—Nellie?"

"Yes," answered Strathearn, sternly and harshly. "Nellie—the young girl you married in Scotland last August—the girl you left to die in her despair—is dying now!"

"It cannot be—it cannot be!" cried Seaforth in bitter distress, forgetting all about Nora, who too had risen, and now stood pale and shocked by his side. "Strathearn," continued Seaforth passionately, "I did not leave her—God is my witness, I did not leave her—never meant to leave her--but she disappeared, as you know."

"And how about the letters she wrote to you?" interrupted Strathearn sternly.

"I have got no letters! On my soul, on my honour, I have never received a single line!" said Seaforth with deep agitation; and then suddenly he turned and looked in his mother's face.

"Mother," he said, "have any letters come for me here—any letters I have not received?"

Lady Seaforth's face grew scarlet in an instant, but she made an effort to hide her secret.

"I do not understand you," she said, "nor yet this disgraceful scene. How dare this man come here!" And Lady Seaforth rose and looked indignantly at Strathearn. "If he has anything to say to you—matters to discuss unfit for Mrs. Trelawn's ears and mine, you had better leave the room with him—his presence here is an insult."

"This is all very fine, my lady," said Strathearn bitterly; "but what about the untruth—to use no harsher word—that you told me about Clayton having left Seaforth's service? It seems this terrible subject—your son's marriage—has been discussed by your ladyship before, when the witness to it had to be smuggled out of the way, and when you condescended to lie to me about it."

"How dare you speak to me thus?" said Lady Seaforth, passionately. "Hugh!" and she turned to Hugh Marchmont. "Will you permit this man to insult me in your house?"

As she thus appealed to her old lover, Hugh Marchmont rose and came forward to the table near where Strathearn was standing.

"When you came into this room," he said, addressing Strathearn in his calm, clear voice, which sounded so distinct and cold after the passionate words which had preceded it, "you asked Lord Seaforth to go with you—at his wife's request, I understood—to see her before she dies?"

"Yes," answered Strathearn briefly, "that is my errand, my excuse for intruding myself into your house, for I presume you are Mr. Marchmont?"

"I am Mr. Marchmont, and I shall be pleased if you and Lord Seaforth will now follow me to another room." And as he spoke Hugh Marchmont left the drawing-room, and a moment later was followed by Strathearn.

"Seaforth!" said his mother, grasping Seaforth's arm, who also—shamed and downcast—was about to leave the room. "Do not go

with that man. What truth is there in this wretched story? Surely, Seaforth, you were never mad enough—never mad enough—"

"Mother, let me go—you heard what he said—I have acted like a scoundrel—and if this poor girl dies I have murdered her!"

As Seaforth said this, he tried to pull his arm from his mother's grasp, and stood there as if overwhelmed with grief and shame.

"My God! Why were you born? Why were you ever born?" cried Lady Seaforth, and she flung her son back from her, and then, with a sort of cry of rage and despair, she hurried from the room, and Seaforth and Nora were alone.

For a moment Nora stood still and silent, but the next she advanced, and laid her hand gently on the arm of the shamed and miserable man.

"Lord Seaforth," she said, "do not think about me, do not distress yourself about me, but go now and do what is right. This poor young lady may not die if you go; do not allow your mother to influence you now."

Then Seaforth looked at her.

"You are a good woman," he said, almost

with a sob. "God bless you! I will go. I will tell you some day how it all happened."

"Go now, or you may be too late," said Nora, still gently; and Seaforth wrung her hand and left the room, and after he was gone Nora sank down on a seat and covered her face. She was shocked, she was surprised, but she was not unhappy that she could not marry Seaforth now.

In the meanwhile, Seaforth, pale and deeply agitated, had joined Mr. Marchmont and Strathearn.

As he entered the room Mr. Marchmont spoke to him.

"I will not ask you now," he said, "how much of this story is true; but this unhappy woman is dying, this gentleman tells me. Will you go to her?"

"How can you ask me?" answered Seaforth, terribly moved. "Go to her! yes, at once! But, Strathearn, surely, Strathearn,"—and he turned his pale face to the stern Scotchman—"she is not—dying—"

"They told me she was, at all events," said Strathearn, with bitter emphasis; "your child struggled into life, it seems, before its time, and

the mother is dying; that was the news I'd to bring you. And for the child's sake—not her own, poor soul—she prayed and begged you to come to acknowledge her before she dies."

"My God!" said Seaforth, and he sank down on a chair and covered his face.

"There is no time to be lost," said Mr. Marchmont. "Seaforth, I am your kinsman; shall I go with you in this unhappy hour—go with you to repair a wrong?"

"Yes," said Seaforth; and a quarter of an hour later these three men—Mr. Marchmont, Seaforth, and Strathearn—drove out of the court-yard at Ryecourt, to start on their melancholy journey. There was a night express that they could get to town by, and almost silently they travelled on their way.

But they did not lose a moment. Pale, grim, and heart-sick sat Strathearn. He knew the worst now; knew all that Clayton could tell him of that hurried journey to Scotland, and of the marriage in the drawing-room in the Edinburgh lodging-house—a marriage undoubtedly binding by the Scottish law, since Clayton had witnessed it, and was now ready to swear (he had received his five hundred

pounds) that in his presence, and in the presence of the supposed minister who had married them, Seaforth had acknowledged Nellie to be his wife.

But this supposed minister had been the loophole through which Seaforth, in an evil hour, had persuaded himself that his marriage to Nellie was not a binding one. Clayton had accidently picked up this supposed minister's acquaintance in the train while travelling down to Scotland with Nellie, on the night of her flight from home. Clayton was travelling second class, and Nellie first; and in the carriage with Clayton sat a lean, hungry-looking man, dressed in the garb of a clergyman, though the garb was a very rusty one.

Clayton had orders to get hold of some "needy parson," Seaforth told him, who would promise to keep the whole thing a secret for twenty pounds. So Clayton made overtures to the man in rusty black, and before they reached Edinburgh, the man in rusty black knew what Clayton wanted, and was only too glad to oblige him for twenty pounds; and would have done it for ten if he had been asked.

He called himself the Rev. James Macfarlane, but he had no appointment and held no living, that Clayton could discover. But he was a Scotch minister, he told Clayton, and Clayton having no particular reason for doubting this, believed him, and arranged with him about the marriage, which duly took place on Seaforth's arrival in Edinburgh.

But when the dark clouds, which even then, were gathering so thickly round the young lord's head, grew darker, and his monetary difficulties became more pressing, it occurred to Seaforth one day to make inquiries about this Mr. Macfarlane, and he took Clayton with him down to Scotland on one of his visits to the Glen of Strathearn, and left Clayton in Edinburgh for the purpose of prosecuting these inquiries.

After some trouble, Clayton heard something of the supposed minister's former life. There was an ugly story attached to it, which need not be related here; he had once been in the Scotch Church, but had been ignominiously expelled from it. And after the time when Clayton had seen him in Edinbugh—the time of Nellie's supposed marriage—this Macfarlane

had mysteriously disappeared. He was known to have been in great difficulties, and it was supposed he had emigrated. This story Clayton had repeated to his lord, and it was a relief to Seaforth's mind to think that he would have no further trouble with this man.

And gradually—knowing there was now no witness to it but Clayton—Seaforth had begun to call his marriage to Nellie "that absurd affair in Scotland." Then he had listened to the promptings of an evil spirit, and turned to the one way which seemed left open to him to repair his ruined fortunes. To Strathearn he had always scoffed at the idea of any marriage. It suited him to do this; circumstances forced him to do it, he told himself; but he did not mean to forsake Nellie.

Nay, in his light and careless way he really loved her. When he thought he had driven her out to die in her despair, the horror and shock had nearly killed him. But his nature was shallow; he tried to forget anything that was painful—as he had told Nora Trelawn at Ryecourt, he "did not care to think."

CHAPTER VIII.

"FOR THE CHILD'S SAKE."

THE grey dawn was breaking over the great city, when, pale and wearied, the three travellers entered it. They had scarcely spoken during that long night's journey on their sad errand. Seaforth, with his hat pulled over his brows and his eyes cast down, was enduring the cruellest anxiety. All his love, tenderness and pity seemed to come back as he recalled Nellie in her bright youth, and as he thought of the misery she must have endured during the past months, and remembered now that if Strathearn spoke the truth, he was but going to see her die.

As they neared London his anxiety became almost pitiable. Even the stern Strathearn felt his heart relent to a certain extent as he looked at Seaforth's sharpened, miserable face.

Hugh Marchmont tried to say some gentle, commiserating word, but Seaforth turned away his head.

"If they were only in time," he thought unceasingly, "only in time."

And the woman who lay near her death agony, to whom he was journeying, prayed this too. Nellie had survived the birth of the frail babe, born before its time into this world of trouble; but she was "sinking fast," the doctor had whispered to Strathearn before he started on his journey to Ryecourt.

But, after her child was born, Nellie's one hope seemed to be to live until its father came. She knew that Strathearn had gone for Seaforth, and she knew also that Strathearn had sought out Clayton, and had learned the whole story of her marriage, before he left town in search of her husband.

Joannah, who had never left her, who had stood by her in her agony and tried to cheer her, told her these things.

"Don't you give way, ma'am," said Joannah. "Clayton's downstairs at this very minute, and he says if the babe lives it will be a lord like its father; just think of that!"

Joannah's words were quite true. Clayton, when he was sought out by Strathearn, on Strathearn learning Nellie's dangerous condition, had at once acknowledged all he knew about the Scottish marriage. In fact he had previously made up his mind to acknowledge it, and thus gain Strathearn's promised reward of five hundred pounds. And when the man heard from the deeply-agitated Strathearn that Nellie was supposed to be dying, he was really affected by the news, and gave Strathearn every information in his power. Then Strathearn drew a cheque and put it into his hand, and bid him go to Miss Brewis's, and tell her what he had told him, and Clayton went.

Thus Nellie knew, as she lay there with her babe clasped to her breast, that if she lived Seaforth would be forced to acknowledge her; and so, for the child's sake, she wished to live. "For the child's sake," she murmured, even in her sleep.

But as the day wore on she grew weaker and weaker. Joannah watching her, became so uneasy that she once more went down to Clayton, and asked if he knew who the "poor young creature's" relations were? Then Clayton

confessed that he did. She was the youngest daughter of Major Blythe, who lived in one of the small streets near Regent's Park; Clayton knew the street and knew the house, he told Joannah; and Joannah, after consulting with the doctor, determined, without asking Nellie, to send for her family.

"Who knows!" said Joannah to Clayton, "that young scamp of a lord may be off nobody knows where to before Mr. Campbell gets to Ryecourt, or whatever is the name of the place you say he's at. No—I can't take the responsibility—you go to her father, tell him she's Lady Seaforth, and that her babe is born, and that her life is hanging on a thread. If he's worth the name of a man he'll come to her; and she, poor soul, will feel more respectable with her own people about her, even if it pleases the Lord to take her."

Clayton accordingly started for Major Blythe's house—the house from which the old, broken-hearted man had been carried the day before. It was not shut up when he arrived there. Inside, the careful Margaret was going over "dear father's things," as she expressed it to her husband before she started. She was

counting the linen and silver spoons; and yet she had really grieved for her father. It was her nature to count spoons, and to lock away little odds and ends, and to believe that everyone was trying to cheat her. And the consequence was that she was very frequently cheated. She was always watching and distrusting her servants and those around her, and her servants, not unnaturally, resented this distrust. She had shed very bitter and very sincere tears over her father's death; but now—the day after his burial—she was hunting all over the house, because she was certain the old woman who had dressed him in his grave-clothes had carried away one of the silver spoons.

She was talking about this spoon, lamenting over this spoon, in her even tones, when Clayton arrived, and asked to see the dead man, who was no longer there to hear the news Clayton brought of his lost child.

Clayton felt not a little shaken when the servant told him, who opened the door in answer to his summons, "that the poor old master was dead, and only buried yesterday."

"And his other daughter," faltered Clayton, "the lady who married Mr. Vyner, the

painter. Could I see her, do you think?"

The servant told him that Mrs. Vyner was in the house at that minute, and then Clayton sent up a message to Margaret. "Ask her to see me on very pressing business," he told the servant to say, and a few minutes later Margaret appeared downstairs, and went into the sitting-room where Clayton was waiting.

She bowed, and as she did not know who Clayton was, she waited for him to explain his business.

"You will excuse me, madam, asking to see you on such a sad occasion as this," said Clayton, "but I had an important communication to make to the late Major Blythe, and I think now it is my duty to make it to you."

Margaret looked up surprised.

"It is concerning your sister," continued Clayton, "the young lady who disappeared from this house some seven or eight months ago."

"Nellie! what about Nellie?" said Margaret, greatly excited. "Have you seen her? Do you know where she is?"

Clayton bowed.

"Madam," he said, "I have seen the lady, and I regret to say the lady is now very ill; but

I have another important communication to make—I was present at her marriage to Lord Seaforth last August."

"At her marriage to Lord Seaforth!" repeated Margaret, in utter astonishment. "What do you say? that she is married; married to Lord Seaforth?"

"Yes, madam; I was present at that marriage, which was kept a secret for family reasons, but circumstances have occurred which render it necessary it should be known. But I regret much, madam, to tell you that young Lady Seaforth is lying dangerously ill."

"Is he with her? Who sent you?" asked Margaret, in the greatest excitement. "Oh, poor, poor father!" she thought, the next minute, "could you but have heard this news; but I always knew," went on Margaret's reflections, "that no sister of mine would really disgrace herself."

"My lord is not with Lady Seaforth at present," said Clayton, in answer to Margaret's questions, "but we hourly expect him—at least, when I say that, we expect him before to-morrow morning. But, in the meantime, if you could go to your sister—"

"Of course I will go! Call a cab at once; and stay—you follow me in a cab also to my husband's studio. I wish him to see you."

Margaret felt proud and elated—she could not help it—when a few minutes later she ran into Vyner's studio in a state of the greatest excitement. The painter was busy, and he turned round with not a very pleased expression on his face when he saw Margaret enter.

"Walter!" cried Margaret, hurrying up to him, "the most wonderful thing has occurred! But I always knew it—I always told you I was sure no disgrace had happened to Nellie—that no disgrace *could* happen to one of us!"

"Have you heard anything about the poor girl, then?" asked Vyner, with much interest.

"Yes, she is married. To whom do you think she is married? You will never guess—though I own I have sometimes thought it might be. She is married to Lord Seaforth!"

"Then he's a most confounded liar!" exclaimed Vyner. "I met him at Mrs. Trelawn's in the winter; I did not like to tell you, for I thought it would only open the old man's grief afresh to mention anything about her, but I asked Lord Seaforth, asked him point-blank,

if he knew anything of Nellie, and he positively denied it."

"It is a pity you did not consult me about this, Walter—I do not see that it would have hurt dear father to talk about Nellie, when he thought of her so much—and, perhaps, had I known that you had had this conversation with Lord Seaforth sooner, I might have learnt the secret before. However, he is my brother-in-law now. It will seem quite strange to be so nearly connected with the peerage."

"And is she well? Poor Nellie! I fear she has not chosen a happy life."

"But why, Walter? Rank is surely a great thing; you will see now the difference that this marriage will make, even to us, when it is known. I should not be surprised if you get a better price for your pictures."

Vyner gave a grim laugh.

"Seaforth won't be able to buy them, by all accounts, at least," he said. "They say he's over head in debt and difficulties—that he's hiding, in fact. Perhaps this accounts for him not acknowledging his marriage."

"Oh! they say so many things," said

Margaret. "They said, you know," she added, a little spitefully, "that your friend, Mrs. Trelawn, was going to marry Lord Seaforth, and you see he has been married all the time to Nellie."

"You told me that little piece of news about Mrs. Trelawn, did you not? I suppose the report arose because she is intimate with his mother."

"I do not know what the dowager will say now," said Margaret, and she laughed. She was thinking of her own interview with Lady Seaforth when that haughty woman had insulted her—an interview of which Margaret had given a very garbled account to Vyner.

"And where is Nellie now?" asked Vyner the next minute.

"At a house in Belgrave Road," said Margaret, "and I am sorry to tell you they fear she is very ill. But she'll get all right now, I hope. I will go to her, and her husband will be with her to-morrow morning, and I am sure we will be able to pull her through. I am going at once, but I thought I would come and tell you first, as I may not be able to get home to dinner."

"Do not think of me," said Vyner. "Go to your sister, and if you will give me the address I will call to inquire how she is during the evening."

Margaret gave the address, and Vyner saw her to her cab, and then returned to his studio. But he could not paint. He felt greatly disturbed by Margaret's news. He had heard more than once lately that Nora Trelawn was going to marry Lord Seaforth, and he had tried to school his heart, and to tell himself it were well she should marry, that she would be happier and more settled married, but he was glad at least that it was not to be Seaforth.

In the meanwhile Margaret had arrived at Miss Brewis's, and was standing listening, with tears in her eyes, to Joannah's account of Nellie's almost desperate condition.

"She's as ill as ill can be," said Joannah, with tears in her own eyes also; "and the babe's alive, certainly, but that's all we can say. Ay, it's a bad business from first to last, and no doubt the hardships and misery your poor young sister has gone through have helped to kill both her and the innocent lamb!"

"Hardships and misery!" repeated Margaret, turning pale.

"Don't you know?" asked Joannah. "Hasn't Clayton told you?"

"Nothing, but that she is Lord Seaforth's wife," said Margaret, trembling.

"Ay, that's just like him, the smooth-tongued villain. Yes, she's his wife, sure enough, so they tell me; but he tried to make out she wasn't, and drove the poor, young, broken-hearted creature out from this very house to lay violent hands on her own life."

"What! what!" cried Margaret, much affected.

"It's God's truth, ma'am! And where do you think we found her?"

"How can I tell?" said Margaret, sobbing. "This is too dreadful!"

"She was found lying in the accident ward of Middlesex Hospital," said Joannah. "She had been picked up in the streets by a policeman, with her poor, dear hand all crushed and broken to pieces, like her poor, dear heart had been crushed and broken before. Ay, it's a sad story, ma'am. Lord Seaforth's wife, indeed! He's taken good care to kill her, anyhow, before he let her have his name!"

Margaret was very much overcome. Miss

Brewis's pitiable account of Nellie came as such a sudden shock, after her elation on hearing that her young sister was married to Lord Seaforth. When she became a little more composed, she asked to see Nellie, but the doctor forbade this.

"I dare not risk it at the present moment, Mrs. Vyner," he said, for Joannah had called him down, and told him who Margaret was. "Lady Seaforth—I understand the poor young lady upstairs is Lady Seaforth—is lying in a most precarious condition; so precarious. that any fresh shock would undoubtedly kill her, and I am told you have not lately seen your sister?"

"No," said Margaret; "but still, I think, if I did see her, I could do her good."

"Wait until Lord Seaforth arrives, then," said the doctor; "unless I have his authority, I dare not risk it. She must see no one but those who have been around her, until her husband comes."

So when Vyner came during the evening to inquire how Nellie was, he found Margaret sitting in Miss Brewis's dining-room in a most depressed and miserable condition. She had

been allowed by Joannah to look in at the door of the sick-room when Nellie was asleep, and had been terribly shocked at her young sister's changed and death-like face.

"She is dying, I believe, Walter!" wept Margaret. And then she told Vyner the pitiable story she had heard from Joannah's hard lips.

Vyner was deeply moved. He bit his lips; he frowned.

"Thank God, her father is dead!" he said.

While Vyner was there—he stayed until past midnight—the frail life of the little babe, the child for whose sake Nellie wished to live, struggled and went out. But the dying mother would not part with it. She moaned when they tried to take it from her feeble arms, which still clasped the little lifeless form to her own almost lifeless breast.

She fell asleep thus, yet murmuring sometimes in that broken slumber, "for the child's sake." And so the night passed on, and then the grey dawn stole in, and fell on the pale faces of the watchers, and on the white faces of the mother and the dead babe. But as the morning advanced, Joannah, with streaming eyes, softly took the dead child from its

mother's arms (who still slumbered on) and laid it in the coffin, which had now been brought into the house, and prepared for it.

But about half-an-hour later, Nellie awoke, and, after restlessly moving her arms, opened her eyes, and then cried out for them to give her back her child. While they were trying to soothe her—showing her the little waxen face pillowed on the white-lined coffin—there was a sudden noise and stir in the house, for Seaforth, Strathearn, and Mr. Marchmont had arrived. Nellie started, looked at the door of the room, and a few moments later Seaforth ran in, and fell down on his knees by the bed where Nellie lay.

"Forgive me, my darling!" he said, almost with a sob, taking one of Nellie's burning hands and pressing his face down on it; "forgive me, Nellie, even now!"

Nellie's face flushed, and, with a sudden effort, she lifted herself up in bed, grasping Seaforth's hand with her dying grasp.

She looked wildly round for a moment, and then stretched out her other arm, and pointed to the dead babe.

"Tell them now," she said, in hoarse and

trembling accents; "tell them now the truth, Murray. Am I not your wedded wife?"

Lord Seaforth rose from his knees.

"Yes, Nellie," he said; "we were married in Edinburgh — everyone may know! Don't, Nellie, don't, my darling, look like that!"

"And the child—the babe?" gasped Nellie, still tightly holding Seaforth's hand.

Lord Seaforth grew very pale as he glanced at the dead child.

"If the child—if your baby had lived, Nellie," he said, in a low, broken voice, "it would have borne my name—would have been Lord Seaforth after me."

Again Nellie looked round, she smiled, and then fell feebly back.

"Nellie! Nellie!" cried Seaforth, bending over her; but with one scarcely uttered word, she turned her head upon the pillow, and so died.

"Baby—" she murmured, and as this last word lingered on her lips, her spirit flitted after the child's.

CHAPTER IX.

"MY SISTER, LADY SEAFORTH."

A TERRIBLE scene occurred immediately after Nellie's death. Seaforth lifted her lifeless body in his arms, and in agonised and passionate tones implored her to speak to him—to say but one word—look at him but once again! He would not believe that she was dead; and as he called out her name, telling her he had always loved her, Margaret ran into the room, and flung her arms also round her dead sister.

"Nellie! Nellie!" cried Margaret, but there was no answer to that name.

Everyone in the room was deeply moved. Joannah, who had been preparing to say some harsh thing to Seaforth, pursed in her thin lips and was silent at the sight of his bitter distress. And as Seaforth kissed Nellie—cried to them to bring something to revive her, that she had but fainted, that she would soon be well—Strath-

earn, grim and pale, also entered the room, and stood with bitten lips and knitted brows, looking at the dead woman he had loved.

He never spoke a word. Joannah, watching him, saw the grey pallor that spread over his face, and how his strong form shook with the violence of feelings he was forcing himself to restrain. She went up to him, she took hold of one of his clenched hands, and whispered a word in his ear.

"Come with me, sir," she said; "you don't look well, and it's enough to shake anyone. You're best out of the room."

Strathearn suffered her to lead him away, and clutching her arm, as if for support, he tottered down the stairs. When in the hall he spoke to her in a husky whisper.

"When the others are all gone, will—you let me see her again?"

"Yes," said Joannah, decisively. "The sweet lamb's in heaven now, and she knows there's no harm in it. And you did more for her than any of them," added Joannah, with an energetic rub at her eyes. "If it hadn't been for you she would have died in a common hospital, and not with everything comfortable

about her as she has done to-day. It's all very fine crying, and sobbing after one's gone —it's too late then—the loudest sobs won't bring one back—but I would rather be cried over when I was living. However, it's no good talking over it now, but I hope his heart is sore within him."

"What time?" asked Strathearn, still in the same hoarse whisper.

"You mean what time you can see the sweet lamb, to have a last look at her?" said Joannah, almost with a whimper. "Let me see—don't let any of them have a word to fling at her good name, for perhaps evil tongues might talk of her if they knew you came to see her even after she was dead, poor dear! Come at twelve o'clock to-night. They'll be away by that time, and you can have your last look in peace."

Without a word Strathearn wrung Joannah's hand and left the house; and a few minutes later Joannah returned to the room where Nellie had died.

By this time Seaforth knew that she was dead. Margaret had laid her sister again gently on the bed, and Seaforth was kneeling by the bedside, his face bent down, but he was

still holding one of Nellie's hands. Standing near him, with his hand upon his shoulder, was his kinsman, Hugh Marchmont.

"Leave her with her sister now, Seaforth," he was saying as Joannah entered. "You have acknowledged her as your wife, and I, as your relative, will see that all the honour that can be paid to her now is paid. Come, Seaforth, with me."

For a moment or two Seaforth made no response to this appeal. Then he rose from his knees, bent down, and, with a murmured word or two, kissed Nellie's face. As he lifted his head, he turned to Margaret, who was standing near, crying bitterly.

"I dare not ask you to forgive me," he said in a faltering voice; and as Margaret made no reply, he put his arm through Hugh Marchmont's and left the room.

"I've kept my tongue off him," said Joannah, bitterly, looking after him, "for the sake of the dead lamb; but I hope I'll live to have the opportunity of telling him some day that after you've murdered a party it's not much good crying over them. No, indeed!"

. . . . . .

That night, as the clocks all over the great city were striking twelve, Joannah, who was watching, heard a gentle tap at the street door. She guessed who it was, and, softly opening the door, admitted Strathearn. She put up her finger warningly, and then led him silently upstairs to the room, where Nellie already lay in her coffin, with her baby on her breast.

Only her sweet face and her small waxen hands were visible, for the whole of the coffin was covered with white flowers. She looked like a young girl asleep, and at the piteous sight, Strathearn completely broke down, and fell sobbing, with his head against the foot of the coffin.

"Leave me for a moment or two," he sobbed out, while the fierce storm of his emotion swept over him; and Joannah at once left the room, and Strathearn was alone with the dead.

Long he knelt there, his whole form absolutely convulsed with the strong, deep passions of his heart. Then he rose to his feet, and stood looking at her, and, after a moment or two, stooped down and kissed one of the cold, white hands, and took one of the white flowers, and hid it in his breast.

. . . . . .

When Nellie lay as though asleep amid the white flowers, which Margaret had arranged round her fair young sister's placid face, another visitor also arrived at Miss Brewis's, and earnestly desired to see her.

This was Dossie Bertrim—a sweet young woman, the love and tenderness of whose rearing lay reflected, as on a mirror, in her loving and tender heart—and who had endured the most cruel anxiety during the last two or three days for the fate of one whose troubles were now ended.

When Nellie did not return to Mrs. Moore's house, after she had started on her sad short journey to seek her father—whose soul had wearied of waiting for her coming—Mrs. Moore naturally felt very uneasy about her young lodger.

She was uneasy on account of Nellie, and yet more uneasy lest she should offend her "dear young lady," as she still always called Dossie Bertrim. This "dear young lady" had, in truth, about her a certain charm which won love for her wherever she went. This charm was her unselfish sympathy, and real kindness to others. Even her mother-in-law—that most

trying of family ties—admitted certain good qualities in Dossie; and her husband was more dearly attached to her now, after being married to her for three years, than when her sweet, blithe smile had first made him feel himself the happiest person in the world.

Dossie Bertrim then, on the morning after her lunch party (the party which had prevented her at once going to see the unhappy Nellie) received a letter from her old servant, Mrs. Moore, which filled her kind heart with absolute consternation. Mrs. Murray had gone out and had never returned, wrote Mrs. Moore; and Dossie immediately on receiving this letter, ran to her husband, who was dressing to go into town.

"Tom," she cried, "read this!" And Tom, having read Mrs. Moore's letter, looked serious, and, as was his wont, took a common-sense view of the case.

"I am afraid, little woman," he said, "all your good nature and kindness has been wasted."

"What do you mean, Tom?" asked Dossie.

"Most probably this young person wasn't quite what she made out," said Tom, laying his hand kindly on his young wife's shoulder.

"What does an innocent child like you know about the evil ways of the wicked world?"

"I know this," said Dossie, turning very red, "that whatever she was, she was a good woman. I overheard her once, Tom, praying, when she did not think anyone else heard her but God; and she wasn't praying for herself—she was praying" (here Dossie suddenly burst into tears) "that if her child were born, that it might be pure and good—that the evils of the world might never come near it—"

Dossie's sobs now fairly interrupted her, and good-natured Tom Bertrim, as he took her in his arms, rubbed his own hand over his eyes also, to wipe away a sympathetic tear.

"Stupid little woman!" he said; "why, you make a fool of a man with a word. Well, what do you want to do, child? To drive into town with me, I'll be bound?"

"Yes," wept Dossie; and in half-an-hour the young couple were on their way to Mrs. Moore's house.

There they found the ill news only confirmed. Mrs. Murray had never returned, though Mrs. Moore had sat up all night waiting for her, and Mrs. Moore naturally did not know what to think.

Tom Bertrim called Dossie aside.

"Look here, darling," he said, "I do not want to distress you, but it is our duty to give notice to the police of this. This unfortunate young woman must be sought for, and you know we could no more find her, when we have no clue whatever, than we could fly."

Dossie could not deny the truth of this, and Tom Bertrim therefore at once went and told the police at Scotland Yard the whole story. The inspector to whom he told the tale smiled cynically.

"It's a pity you didn't come two days ago, sir," he said, "at least if you had a mind for a reward of two hundred pounds."

"How do you mean?" asked Tom Bertrim.

"This young lady—you give an exact description—was picked up yesterday in one of the small streets near Regent's Park, on the occasion of an old military gentleman's funeral, and she was carried into the railway station by one of the force, who conveyed her from there to Middlesex Hospital, for she had been much injured by one of the horses at the funeral. The member of the force thought he recognised her as the young woman who had disappeared

from Chelsea Bridge some time back, and he came here, and the gentleman who had offered a reward for her recovery was sent for, and went with me and the member of the force who had found her to Middlesex Hospital, for the purpose of identifying the young woman. He did identify her, and the reward was paid, and the young woman is now with her friends."

"And who is she?" asked Tom Bertrim.

"It's a queer story," answered the inspector. "They say she's the wife—not acknowledged, you know—of Lord Seaforth. But if you are interested in the lady, she is at present at Miss Brewis's boarding-house, No. —, Belgrave Road, and I'm told she is dangerously ill."

Tom Bertrim thanked the inspector for his information, and returned with his news to his Dossie, who at once went to inquire "how the lady was?" at Miss Brewis's door, and sent in her card.

The answer to her inquiries was but a sad one. "The lady was very ill—unconscious—and could see no one;"and with this sad news Dossie was forced to go away.

Not the next day, but the day following that, Dossie again came into town, and again

went to make inquiries at Miss Brewis's door.

Nellie was now lying amid her white flowers; and Dossie hearing this, prayed that she might be allowed to look upon the sweet face of the dead.

She was shown into Joannah's dining-room, and as she sat there shedding some very bitter tears over the hapless fate of the poor girl she had so faithfully befriended, Joannah, attired in black, and looking more grim than ever, entered the room.

"I have called to see—I have just heard the sad news," said Dossie, in a voice broken into tears, "that—poor Lady Seaforth is dead."

"Yes, she's at *rest*," snapped Joannah. "She wasn't much troubled with visitors," she added, a moment later, "when she lived here before — name being unknown — ay, it's the way of the world."

"I knew her," continued Dossie, in her sweet, sympathetic voice, "when indeed she had no name. You know her story, of course? I am the lady who took her home that night—when her misery for the time had driven her mad."

"No!" exclaimed Joannah. "Now, you

aren't, are you? Well, if you are, I wish you may live long and be rewarded—and I wouldn't say that to many."

"She stayed with me a long time," said Dossie gently, "and I loved her very dearly, and if I had had my own way, she would have been at Castlewood—that is my home—now. But she wished to leave—she wished to see Lord Seaforth; she did not tell me her husband's name, though she told me all the rest of the story; but she wished to see her husband, and she wrote to him—"

"Wrote to him, the villain!" cried Joannah. "And him coming and crying and slobbering over her poor lifeless corpse, and making pretence he really loved her, and taking them all in—nearly taking in me—but he didn't!"

"She wrote to him, I know, twice," said Dossie. "Her first letter was addressed under cover to his servant, a man called Clayton, and this letter was returned through the post; and she wrote again."

"Then he shall answer whether he got them or not, or who got them," said Joannah. "Ay—she's best at rest—she had a tender heart, and he'd bruised and broken it too sore to mend."

"And did she never mention me," asked Dossie, "after she was brought here from the hospital?"

"She never mentioned mortal name," answered Joannah, "but her babe's. She was unconscious mostly, and when she did speak it was always about living for the child's sake. It died in her arms, and she kept it there until it grew cold against her breast—and then I got it away while she slept—but she missed it, and then this man—Lord Seaforth—came, and she started up and gripped him by the hand, and asked him before us all whether she was his wedded wife."

"And what did he say?"

"That she was—he found out then that it was too late to tell any more lies, and so he confessed the truth; and it killed her, for she fell back dead three minutes after he entered the room."

"Oh, poor, poor thing!" said Dossie, who could not restrain her tears.

"She's best at rest, ma'am; he wanted money, and she'd not got any, and so he would have always looked upon her as a burden. But would you like to see her? She's lying, the

poor lamb, among white flowers, for the flowers that come here for her now are past belief—she's my lady now, so she gets every respect," added Joannah with a bitter giggle.

When Dossie saw the sweet white face lying amid the white flowers, she was deeply affected. She bent down and kissed the cold brow, and touched the chill, small, waxen hands.

While she was still standing looking at Nellie; telling Miss Brewis how ill she had been at Castlewood, and how gentle and patient she had always been when she was there, Margaret Vyner entered the room, and looked somewhat surprised and dignified to find a stranger looking at her dead sister.

Margaret beckoned to Miss Brewis, who went to the door to speak to her.

"Who is that lady, Miss Brewis?" said Margaret. "I do not wish everyone to see Lady Seaforth."

Joannah's visage grew scarlet in a second.

"I'll tell you who the lady is, ma'am," she said, in her tartest tones, for she had taken a great dislike to Margaret; "that lady is the party who took your poor sister in when she was homeless—when she was not called Lady

Seaforth, indeed!—and when she had gone out to end her young life, being driven to it by the cruelty of the party who cried and slobbered yesterday over her lifeless corpse! Yes, Mrs. Vyner, if anyone has a right to see her, that lady ought to have, for she gave the poor lamb kindness when she was living, not after she was dead!"

"Oh! Miss Brewis!" said Margaret, much shocked.

Miss Brewis and Margaret were, in fact, on anything but pleasant terms. Margaret was always talking of "Lady Seaforth" to Joannah, and Joannah could not forget all the details of the sad story, if Margaret could. Margaret irritated Joannah by perpetual allusions to "My dear sister's rank," or "We must consult Lord Seaforth, of course, before we decide anything." It was all Joannah could do to restrain herself when Margaret talked in this way. And when Margaret brought their old friend Mrs. Saunders to see the poor dead girl in her coffin, whom Mrs. Saunders had known since she was a rosy little girl, as that good woman wailed and wept over the piteous sight, Joannah heard Margaret say,

in her calm and evenly-modulated voice—

"Yes, it's very, very sad, isn't it, Mrs. Saunders? If only dear Nellie had trusted me it would have been all right now."

"And she was married to Lord Seaforth all the time, then?" asked kind Mrs. Saunders, drying her eyes, from which her tears were streaming.

"Oh yes, of course, Mrs. Saunders," replied Margaret. "They were only waiting to ackowledge it until some money affairs of Lord Seaforth's were settled; but, of course, when the baby was expected, that hurried on matters, and dear Nellie sent for her husband, who was staying with some of his relations, and he came at once, for the purpose of telling us about the marriage, but you see this is the sad end.' And Margaret pointed to her dead sister.

"Well," muttered Joannah to herself, "that beats everything. And if she isn't took quite suddenly, like Ananias, all I can say is, she hasn't met with her deserts."

So when Margaret made any objections about Dossie Bertrim seeing "Lady Seaforth," Joannah felt very angry. But Margaret was too wise to continue these objections when she heard

who Dossie was. She went, therefore, and thanked Dossie for her kindness to her "dear young sister, Lady Seaforth, under the unfortunate circumstance in which you met her."

Dossie was very good-natured. She spoke kindly to Margaret, and said it was very sad; but as she left the house she pressed Joannah's rugged hand more warmly than she did that of the correct and graceful Margaret.

CHAPTER X.

QUITE WASTED.

By Vyner's express wish, Nellie was buried by her father's side, in Kensal Green Cemetery. Mr. Marchmont and Vyner arranged this, for Margaret suggested that poor Nellie should be laid in the family vault of the long-descended Seaforths. But Greystoke was a journey from London, and Vyner forcibly pointed out the extreme folly of such a proceeding.

"Let her sleep," he said, "by the side of her poor father—who broke his heart for her loss—more than the other man will do, I'm pretty certain."

"Walter, dear, please do not speak in that way of Lord Seaforth now," advised Margaret, "remember, he is one of the family, and if we do not speak well of him, people will be sure to say he behaved ill to poor, dear Nellie."

"And didn't he behave ill?" asked Vyner, sharply.

"Well, dear, we must not speak of the dead, except very kindly and tenderly; but if poor, dear Nellie had only trusted her own sister—a sister, whom you know, Walter dear, was devoted to her—I have not the slightest doubt she would have been alive now, and acknowledged as Lady Seaforth, and perhaps going to be presented at the next Drawing-room."

"She made an unfortunate omission, then," scoffed Vyner.

"You need not sneer, Walter dear. Ask Mrs. Saunders, ask everyone, if I did not devote myself to Nellie from our earliest childhood? I never thought of myself; and, perhaps, poor dear darling, she thus learned to be selfish—for it was selfish, you know, Walter, of her, never to tell poor father and myself, and to leave us to suffer such constant anxiety on her account, when she might have relieved it with a word."

"She had promised the man she called her husband, I suppose—the man you wish me to be civil to, but I won't," answered Vyner, and

he kept his word and would have nothing to say to Lord Seaforth.

The funeral arrangements were therefore settled by Mr. Marchmont and Vyner. But Seaforth followed Nellie to her grave. He looked pale, haggard, and deeply affected, and seemed to feel his position very acutely. As they were leaving the open grave he said a few words to Vyner, but the painter made no answer. He could not forget, as Margaret wished him to do, that Seaforth had been the cause of Nellie's sad and early death.

Another man also followed the hapless girl to her last resting-place. This man did not join the mourners round the grave, nor approach it until the service was over and the mourners gone. Then, when no one was left but the grave-diggers, who were commencing to shovel back the earth, Strathearn drew near, and went and stood looking down into the open grave, and read the words inscribed on the coffin lid :

ELLINOR,
WIFE OF MURRAY,
SEVENTH VISCOUNT SEAFORTH.
DIED 3RD OF MARCH,
AGED 19 YEARS.

Strathearn stood quite still until the grave was filled in, and the sods laid down, and the men who had been busy had lifted their tools and gone away. Then, when he was alone, he suddenly flung himself on the grave, and laid his head on the newly-cut sods.

"Good-bye, little woman," he said; "it has been quite wasted—all wasted—but you know now how well I have loved you, and I love no other."

He was her truest mourner. All the others were gone away; gone back to the world, to their everyday life, but Strathearn's heart lay buried in Nellie's grave, and yet he knew as he had said, "that it was quite wasted."

. . . . . .

Some days after the funeral he went to see Joannah Brewis.

"Well," he said in his brusque way, "I've come to bid you good-bye, and to pay you what I owe you."

"You owe me nothing," answered Joannah sturdily. "Why, Mr. Campbell," she continued, looking curiously at the tall Scotchman, on whose head at that moment the sun was

shining, "why, Mr. Campbell, I declare you are turning grey."

"You must get me some patent dye, then, Miss Brewis," said Strathearn, with a harsh little laugh, "it will never do for a young man like me to lose my looks." And he laughed again.

But Joannah did not laugh. She knew well enough what had changed him, and how his secret grief had been bitter and strong.

"Ay," she said, still looking at him, "she chose the worst man."

"And how is the 'worst man,' then?" scoffed Strathearn.

"Never seen the face of him again," answered Joannah. "The old gentleman they call Mr. Marchmont arranged everything and paid everything; and I'm told—mind, I know nothing of the truth of it—that Lord Seaforth has gone back with the old gentleman—he's a kind of relation, I think—to the place where you went to fetch Lord Seaforth from."

"Ryecourt?" said Strathearn.

"Yes, Ryecourt—that's the name. And I'm told, too, that that rich widow lady is still there with old Lady Seaforth—since I suppose

we must call the dear lamb who is gone, young Lady Seaforth now—at least that sister of hers has dinned her new name pretty often in my ears. But, as I was saying, the young lord has gone back with Mr. Marchmont."

This news of Joannah's was quite correct. Hugh Marchmont had felt sorry for Seaforth —sorry for a weak man tempted beyond his strength—and he believed (though Joannah did not) in the truth of his repentance. And for another reason, also, Hugh Marchmont wished Seaforth to go back with him to Ryecourt. This reason was, that Seaforth had assured him, on his word of honour, that no letter of Nellie's had ever reached his hands after she had disappeared from Belgrave Road.

Mr. Marchmont made inquiries upon this, and found that Mrs. Benson, Lady Seaforth's late lady's maid, had orders to forward all letters that arrived at the house in South Kensington to Ryecourt. Then he saw Mrs. Benson, who admitted having forwarded two letters for "my lord," under cover to "my lady." If these were Nellie's letters—the letters Mrs. Bertrim declared she knew Nellie had sent, —it was but right that it should be discovered

what had become of them, and that Seaforth should be exonerated so far in the eyes of Nellie's family by it being proved that he had never received them.

"It will do no good now," said Seaforth, moodily casting down his eyes, as his kinsman, Hugh, thus pronounced his views on the subject.

"It is right that it should be known what has become of them," answered Hugh Marchmont. "If they were sent on to my house I will learn if they ever arrived there."

Seaforth did not speak. He could not quarrel with Hugh Marchmont, because he was actually at this moment indebted to him for the means of burying his wife. Seaforth in fact knew he was a ruined man, and his real misery and regret about Nellie was rendered more bitter by his own deplorable difficulties.

He could not stay in town, and he had no money to go abroad and no credit anywhere. The story of his secret marriage had got whispered about, and Mr. Cairns, with whom he had an interview, advised him to "keep out of the way for the present, and make the best of things afterwards. I understand," added the

lawyer with a hard smile, "that the lady, who with some justice bears the name of Crœsus's Widow, is still with Lady Seaforth at Ryecourt, and I advise you to go there." And Mr. Cairns again smiled.

Seaforth felt utterly downcast at the prospect before him. He had loved Nellie as deeply as it was in his nature to love—loved her selfishly for the sake of the fair face that had waned as his love had waned—but he had felt her early and melancholy death very bitterly. He was touched, he was cut to the heart, and yet had she lived what would she have been to him? A burden, a worry; and perhaps sitting there gloomily opposite to Hugh Marchmont, he knew this—knew that his love had never been strong enough to care for another better than himself.

And a day or two after Nellie had been laid by her father's side a letter came to Seaforth from his mother, embodying in words the thoughts which he dare scarcely think.

DEAR MURRAY (he read, in the fine, clear handwriting of Lady Seaforth),—I am told the unhappy tie which you had the great misfortune to contract, is now ended by death. I will not preach to you, I will not be hypocrite enough to pretend to condole with you. The wretched marriage into

which you were forced could have only brought you misery, as unequal marriages always do. Therefore, I will not pretend to be sorry that all this is ended now, and that you are free to form a new and, I pray and trust, a happier alliance. Murray, you know what I mean—you know whom I mean. After that wretched Scotchman, Mr. Campbell, who seems to have taken, certainly, a remarkable interest in the unfortunate young woman now in her grave—after this wretched man, then, was gone, after you and Hugh Marchmont were gone, I felt utterly prostrated. I refused to see Mrs. Trelawn—I was too much ashamed and upset by the whole scene to see her. But she was very good. She wrote me a little note to tell me not to distress myself—she said everything a delicate-minded woman could say; then came the news that you were free—and once more some hope, some comfort stole into my miserable heart. Murray, shall I appeal to you in vain? You know the circumstances, you know the whole wretched position. But you will say this unhappy affair has changed your relationship with Mrs. Trelawn. No doubt, to a certain extent, it has done so; but she is a peculiar woman—the fact, I believe, that you went and acknowledged this unhappy girl on her death-bed as your wife (though I do not believe actually in the marriage) has, I am sure, *told in your favour;* and, then, I have made the best of the affair to her—an old entanglement, long before you ever saw her—you understand? She is romantic; has had some foolish love of her own, no doubt (not the late Crœsus, I suppose), and I believe she is ready to forgive you—ready to believe that your love for her led you into acting as you have done. Forgive me if I hurt your feelings by thus writing plainly. I am your mother, you are my dear, dear son, and no tie can be so near and so strong as ours. I write in my love for you—a love which you know has never changed—

There were a few more lines in this letter—lines of mingled advice and tenderness—advice to keep fast friends with Hugh Marchmont, and to avoid any quarrel or meeting with Mr. Campbell, of Strathearn. "The sooner you come here the better," wrote Lady Seaforth; and Seaforth, after reading the letter twice, sat moodily thinking over his position.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HIDDEN LETTERS.

Seaforth's moody cogitations ended in his deciding to go to Ryecourt. Mr. Marchmont wished this, and his mother wished it; and though shamed and unhappy, Seaforth knew there was truth in his mother's letter—knew that her estimate of Nora's character was probably a just one.

But it was a bitter thing for the man to do—to meet Nora again—to stand before her at best as a dishonourable and unprincipled man. But on the other hand, if she would forgive him; if all this dreary past could be hushed up and forgotten, it would be well—yes, Seaforth knew it would be well—and so he went back to Ryecourt prepared to ask Nora again to be his wife.

And Lady Seaforth's estimate of Nora's character had been a just one. The mother,

we may be sure, had cast the best and most becoming light upon her son's misdemeanours. She had talked to Nora of "this sad affair;" told her how Seaforth had fallen into it when almost a boy—"long before he met you"—and how the tie had galled and worried him into a hundred follies.

"His great fault is that his heart is too kind," pleaded the mother; "this wretched girl had persuaded him to give her some promise or other in Scotland, and then this Mr. Campbell of Strathearn, who I think is partly mad, met her, and formed, it appears to me, a very extraordinary intimacy and friendship with her, considering her relationship to Seaforth; and when the girl took ill, they planned together, I suppose, to induce Seaforth to say she was his wife. This is how I understand the story. However, she is dead, and you must forgive poor Murray."

Nora cast down her eyes.

"I am sorry for Lord Seaforth," she said, "most sorry, for I am sure he has a good heart; and if he thinks he wronged this poor girl, her death will be a terrible blow to him."

"For the moment, perhaps," answered Lady

Seaforth. "But, ah! my dear Mrs. Trelawn, a woman to retain the affection of a refined man like Murray must have something more than a pretty face. Her death is a blessing. I can look on it in no other light—for if she had lived, fancy the misery Murray must have endured. Bound to a woman he did not love—to a woman totally unfitted for his position—ignorant, low born—oh! poor Murray, it would have killed him!"

"Then she was not a lady?" asked Nora, in her gentle, pitiful way.

"Of course not—what lady would have acted as she did? No; he has had an escape. But he is so unhappy about you—he feels, he says, ashamed to meet you—because you naturally do not know all the circumstances of the case, and Murray is too generous to speak against the girl now that she is dead."

"I am sorry for Lord Seaforth," again said Nora, and she really felt so.

And when she saw him, pale, haggard, and looking really wretchedly ill, she felt yet more sorry. She pressed his hand with sympathetic pressure; she thought she understood all the shame, the self-reproach, overwhelming his soul.

In judging of the feelings of those around us,

we may understand some of them, but as a rule there are other feelings that we certainly do not understand. That complex and revolving machine, the human heart, is rarely fully known by its owner's friends. Nora felt sorry for Lord Seaforth, because she believed that he had done what was right, when to do so was to fling his fortune to the wind. She thought vanity did not blind her, because she knew that it was her fortune that had at first attracted Lord Seaforth; but he had given up that fortune—for he could not tell this unhappy girl would die, argued Nora to herself—for a sense of right, a sense of honour. Nora naturally believed Lady Seaforth's story about her son. He had given this poor girl a foolish promise in Scotland to marry her—perhaps called her his wife before this rough Scotchman, Mr. Campbell—and when she was very ill he had fulfilled that promise, though it was bringing absolute ruin on himself. Nora knew, of course, of the almost desperate condition of Seaforth's fortunes. But she was too generous to think of this; her enormous wealth made it absolutely of no consequence to her whether the man she married was poor or rich.

She therefore received Seaforth kindly, when he returned to Ryecourt, and approached her with his eyes cast down, and with shame and discomfort in his heart.

His ordinary easy manner was quite changed, and he was grave and silent, and dressed in deep mourning. This mourning made Lady Seaforth feel very angry, for Hugh Marchmont also wore black as a token of respect for his kinsman's dead wife.

Yet not a word was spoken of the dead wife the day that Hugh Marchmont and Seaforth returned to Ryecourt, nor yet for two days afterwards. Hugh Marchmont generously wished to allow the first strain and annoyance of the situation to pass away before he approached it, for he was still determined to learn what had become of Nellie's letters.

He sought a quiet opportunity, therefore, of speaking to his old love, Lady Seaforth, about them, and he placed the circumstances in this light before her.

"I am going to ask you a question," he said, with his quiet smile, addressing Lady Seaforth on the terrace at Ryecourt, on the third morning after his return; "do not answer without

thinking it over, for it is a serious question as regards Seaforth."

"What is it?" asked Lady Seaforth, and she coloured and moved her hands uneasily.

"It is this—two letters were written by the unfortunate girl who is now dead, to Seaforth after—"

"Oh, Hugh!" interrupted Lady Seaforth, deprecatingly, "do not open out again this wretched subject. The girl is dead, her child is dead; what object have you in doing so?"

"This," said Hugh Marchmont firmly, "that if Seaforth received these letters, which were undoubtedly sent to him here, he is quite unworthy to be—what I presume you still wish him to be—the husband of a good woman like Mrs. Trelawn."

Lady Seaforth was terribly annoyed. She grew pale and red by turns, she bit her lips, and glanced uneasily at Mr. Marchmont.

"You would not surely," she said at last, "tell her anything about these letters? Surely, Hugh, you have more regard for us—some little remembrance of old times. Surely you would never try to interfere and prevent a marriage which would absolutely save Murray from ruin?"

"Not willingly," answered Hugh Marchmont; "but there is something due to this lady. Seaforth positively, and on his honour as a gentleman, denies he ever received these letters, which if he had received would probably have saved his young wife's life. If he did not receive them, I can view his conduct in a different light; but if he did receive them, and they no doubt were forwarded to him by Mrs. Benson, then, I repeat, he is utterly unworthy to marry Mrs. Trelawn, and it is my duty to tell her that he is unworthy."

"And you would do this?" asked Lady Seaforth bitterly, turning round, and facing her old lover.

"Yes," said Hugh Marchmont. "I would do this—from a sense of right, a sense of honour, to a defenceless woman."

"What is Mrs. Trelawn to you?" asked Lady Seaforth passionately. "You take a wonderful interest in her?"

"I do take an interest in her—the friendly interest of a middle-aged man in a very charming young woman. But it is not from this interest I would act in this matter. For your son's sake, for Seaforth's sake, I

wish to clear his name from so foul a stain."

Lady Seaforth clasped her hands—she grew pale—she stood there looking at the calm, determined face of her old lover.

"Hugh—" she began, "what will you say—you know how I have loved Murray—he was all I have had to love in a long, wretched life—" And Lady Seaforth burst into tears.

"Do not distress yourself," said Hugh Marchmont, "but does this mean that you kept these letters back from Seaforth?"

"I knew nothing about this marriage, or so-called marriage," said Lady Seaforth, in a voice broken with sobs. "I knew of some wretched entanglement, that was all—and—and two letters came for Murray—I guessed where they came from—and—"

"You destroyed them?" asked Hugh Marchmont quickly.

"No—I locked them away. It made me miserable enough—but I did it for Murray's sake."

"Will you give me these letters?"

"Why? What good can they do now? I have confessed the truth to you, Hugh—lowered myself in your eyes."

"No," said Hugh Marchmont, and he smiled. He meant she could not now lower herself any further in his eyes, but Lady Seaforth never quite understood her old lover, and she now began to dry her tears.

"I am glad you do not judge me harshly," she said. "It was for Murray's sake—my only child."

"Yes," said Hugh Marchmont, and again he smiled. "And now, for that only child's sake, will you give me the letters?"

"You will not show them to Mrs. Trelawn? You will not mention them to her?"

"I will not—I simply want them to satisfy myself."

"Very well, you shall have them. Ah, Hugh, times are changed indeed when you can speak to me thus!"

"Yes, times are changed," answered Hugh Marchmont, though not unkindly; "and now, will you bring me the letters?"

And Lady Seaforth was obliged to bring them. She placed them in Hugh Marchmont's hands without another word, and Hugh Marchmont put them into Seaforth's.

"Your mother had hidden them," he said.

"I am glad for your sake this matter is cleared up, and I shall write to Mr. Vyner and tell him how it was you did not receive them."

Seaforth took the letters; his hand trembled —the letters from the dead,—and then he began to think of the living.

"If he writes to Vyner," he thought, casting down his eyes, "somehow, we can never tell how, it may reach Mrs. Trelawn's ears that poor, poor Nellie was Vyner's sister-in-law. Mrs. Trelawn used to be intimate with Vyner —better hush up the whole thing—they think as ill of me as they can, I dare say, already. What is the good of saying anything now? If it could bring back Nellie—"

And he honestly believed that if he could bring back Nellie, he would sacrifice anything to do so. But as he could not—

"I think," he said, hesitating, and still keeping his eyes fixed on the ground, "that I would rather you did not write to Mr. Vyner,— you see it can do no good now—"

"Except remove a very disgraceful impression of you from Mr. Vyner's mind," rather sharply interrupted Hugh Marchmont.

"I must bear that—I am willing to bear it—there is my mother to consider," still hesitated Seaforth.

"I advise you to let me write," said Mr. Marchmont gravely.

"I would rather you did not," said Seaforth. "As I said before, it can do no good now—"

"The truth is always good," answered Hugh Marchmont yet more gravely. "You are a young man—take an old man's advice—tell the truth, and face the consequences of any evil you have done, manfully, and you will never regret it."

"I would rather you did not write," again said Seaforth, and Mr. Marchmont nodded his head and left him.

"He will regret this," he thought; and the day was not far distant when Seaforth had bitter reason to remember his kinsman's neglected advice.

But in the meantime, as regards Nora, everything seemed to be going fairly smooth for him. His evident depression and shame—his remorse even—more favourably impressed her than if he had endeavoured to seem indifferent or

heartless under such exceptionally painful circumstances. Some days passed away without him seeking any private conversation with Nora, or making any allusion to what had passed between them before Strathearn's sudden appearance at Ryecourt. But after some days Nora—who had stayed on in Dorsetshire at Lady Seaforth's earnest entreaty, and from a feeling of delicacy and kindness—thought that it was quite time now that she should return home, and she accordingly told her hostess this.

Lady Seaforth pressed her to remain, but Nora named a day when she would leave, and she determined to avoid, if possible, giving Seaforth an opportunity of speaking to her alone before she went. She wished, in fact, to test her own feelings on the subject. She was sorry for, and interested in a young, good-looking man, whom adverse fate seemed so relentlessly to pursue; but pity is not love, though it may be akin to it. But while Nora was in this undecided state of mind, Lady Seaforth was urging her son to speak to her, to have the affair settled when he had so favourable a chance.

But shame partly, and partly the bitter

regret that he had truly felt for the girl-wife whose hapless fate still perpetually haunted him, held Seaforth back.

"It was too soon to say anything," he told his mother moodily; and he probably might not have done so if an accident had not unexpectedly thrown him with her alone.

CHAPTER XII.

NEMESIS.

They met by chance, one sunny afternoon, in one of the green lanes near Ryecourt, Nora having been in a little dene near, gathering wild flowers; and she was sitting on the bare trunk of an uprooted tree by the roadside, when Seaforth unexpectedly appeared.

They both were very much embarrassed when they saw each other. Nora was looking very pretty in her brown straw rustic hat, and a great bunch of wild blue hyacinths lying on her knee. She was conscious that she blushed deeply as Seaforth approached her, and Seaforth saw that blush, and perhaps it nerved him to say what he did.

"You have been gathering flowers, I see," he said. "May I sit down?"

"Oh, yes," answered Nora, and she moved slightly further up on the trunk of the tree,

while Seaforth also seated himself on it. "There are such pretty flowers down in that little dene," continued Nora nervously.

Seaforth did not speak for a moment. He put out his hand and took up one of Nora's blue hyacinths, as if half unconsciously—he was in truth not thinking of the hyacinths, but of the words in which he could frame what was passing in his mind.

At last he spoke, with some abruptness.

"My mother tells me you are going to leave Ryecourt, Mrs. Trelawn?" he said.

"Yes," said Nora, trying to speak with ease, and smiling, "I have paid quite a long visit—much longer than I intended when I came."

"There is something," said Seaforth, crushing in his agitation the flower he held in his hand, "something I would like to ask you—a question I would like ask you—before you go."

"Wait—till I see you in town," faltered Nora.

"I may not see you in town," answered Seaforth, regaining to a certain extent his old manner. "I'm thinking of going abroad; but before I go, when I have the opportunity of

doing so, I want you to answer my question. It is a very simple one, though a good deal depends on the answer. It is—can you forgive me?"

Nora was greatly confused.

"I wish," she said, "you had not asked me this yet, Lord Seaforth."

"You think it is too soon? Perhaps it is; but suspense is hard to bear to a man in my position."

Nora was silent. She kept nervously drawing a pattern with the stick of her sunshade on the grassy roadway before her.

"I know," continued Seaforth, "I do not deserve a favourable answer—that in your eyes, and in my own also, I have behaved ill—very ill—but though I cannot explain, there are circumstances—," and here Seaforth's voice faltered and broke.

"Do not speak of them," said Nora, generously, now looking up, "I understand—and it is painful to you, I know, to recall the past—and—and—if you mean—"

"I mean, can you forgive that past?" asked Seaforth, in a low voice.

For a moment Nora hesitated: then she said—

"Yes, I can forgive that past; but do not speak of it just now—come and see me in town—and we can then settle our future arrangements."

She thus virtually accepted him, and Seaforth felt that it was so. He put out his hand and took her little trembling one.

"Thank you," he said; "from my heart I thank you," and these brief words were all that were spoken further on the subject between them.

They returned together to the house, both grave and almost silent. But Seaforth felt an immense relief steal over his mind when he thought of the great change of fortune that this short conversation would cause. It excited him; his pale face flushed, and he looked brighter and happier than he had done since Nellie's death. Yet he could not forget her—a shadow lingered by his side, and fell grey and cold athwart the brightening prospects of his life.

. . . . . .

The next day Nora left Ryecourt. Seaforth escorted her to the train, and they parted with the understanding that in a month they were to meet in town.

"It is better that I should marry, I suppose," thought Nora, very gravely, as the train bore her away from Seaforth's sight; and as Seaforth walked back to Ryecourt he also looked on his marriage with Nora as a settled thing, and began speculating and deciding what he would do with his new wealth.

But scarcely had Nora arrived at home—she was actually changing her travelling dress—when a few pencilled lines from Vyner were placed in her hand, asking her to see him for a few minutes, as he had something important to tell her.

Nora quickly went down to receive her old friend, who looked greatly disturbed and agitated as she entered the room.

"Nora," he said, advancing and taking her hand, "I heard that you were to return to-day, and I have not lost a moment in calling upon you; for it cannot—surely it cannot be true, what I hear—that you are engaged to Lord Seaforth?"

Nora cast down her eyes, and blushed very deeply.

"I—I—am not actually engaged to him," she said.

"Not actually engaged?" repeated Vyner; "then there is some truth in this report? Nora, do you know—you cannot know—that his young wife—poor, poor Nellie Blythe—is scarcely dead?"

"Nellie Blythe!" repeated Nora, in the utmost astonishment. "Your wife was a Miss Blythe—no relation, surely, of hers?"

"Her own sister," answered Vyner, with great bitterness. "Some eight months ago, Nellie Blythe disappeared one night from her father's house, and it broke the old man's heart; and until she was dying we never knew what had become of her. What had happened to her afterwards was this: Lord Seaforth had married her in Scotland, and, I suppose, wearied of her, for he induced the unhappy girl to believe he was not really married to her, and in her shame and agony, she tried to destroy herself."

"Oh, Walter! oh, Walter! can this be true?" cried Nora, deeply agitated.

"It is quite true—too true, Nora; and if you want proofs and witnesses, I have them ready. Poor Nellie in her great distress was sheltered by a kind little woman called Mrs. Bertrim,

and she will tell you the story, if you would like to hear it from her lips. And Nellie wrote to Seaforth—wrote twice—and still he never came to her assistance, or took the least notice of the poor broken-hearted girl, until Mr. Campbell, of Strathearn, went for him to Rye-court, and brought him just in time to see her die."

Nora grew cold and faint. She sat down, she covered her face, and then she held out her hand to her old friend.

"If this is true, Walter," she said in a low tone, "you have saved me from a terrible fate."

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The next day brought a letter to Seaforth, at Ryecourt, from Nora. He received it with a smile, but as he read its contents a sickening feeling of shame and disgrace completely overwhelmed him.

DEAR LORD SEAFORTH (he read),—I have seen Mr. Vyner since my return, and heard from him the true and sad history of his young sister-in-law's marriage and death. I do not wish to dwell on the painful circumstances, but they entirely and completely preclude the idea of any further engagement between us, and I must ask you to consider this decision a final one.—Yours truly,

NORA TRELAWN.

Seaforth flung this letter on the floor after reading it, and as he left the room his mother took it up. It was the last blow—Nemesis, grim and relentless—and it left Seaforth a hopelessly ruined man.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT LAST.

Two years passed away after Nellie's death almost uneventfully for Nora. Sir Thomas and Lady Stainbrooke still continued to live with her, and she was admired and courted, and might have changed her name from Crœsus's Widow "very advantageously," as her aunt frequently told her, if she would have consented to do so. But she remained a widow, and her life to all outward seeming ran smoothly and quietly on.

But if no change had come to Nora in these two years, considerable change had occurred in the fortunes of Margaret Vyner, for during them Margaret had become a very great lady indeed.

True, it was but reflected greatness, though Margaret did not see it in this light, and was satisfied that the remarkable success which had

attended Vyner in the last two years as a painter was due to her influence and taste. Vyner, in fact, had painted a great picture—a picture which at once made him not only pre-eminent among his fellow-artists, but gave him a world-wide reputation and fame. It also made him a rich man, at least a man who could command a very large income ; and Margaret, having the benefit of this income, became in her own eyes, and perhaps in the eyes of a certain section of other people, a great lady.

She gave artistic and fancy balls, at which she wore the diamonds that Nora had given her, and to which she invited her husband's patrons, and everyone she thought it was advantageous or desirable to know. She rather patronised Nora than otherwise, and shook her head and smiled when Vyner once said something about Seaforth having wished to marry Nora.

"That is such an old story, dear," she said ; "such folly—just like most of these reports. Poor Lord Seaforth, I fear he will never get over dear Nellie's death!"

In her conversation with her friends, she

still frequently referred to "Lady Seaforth," and altogether held herself to be honoured by this connection. She used to take wreaths of flowers and hang them on the white marble cross beneath which Nellie slept after her short sad journey.

"I have been to my poor young sister, Lady Seaforth's grave," she would say, after these expeditions, and she was quite satisfied that she went there out of tender devotion to the dead.

But to this prosperous and self-filled life, a sudden end was destined to occur. And, strange to relate, this sudden end came by Margaret's absolute belief in her own infallibility.

Among other pleasures and luxuries which Margaret at this time asked Vyner to give her, she wished him to buy her a riding horse.

"Why, dear Margaret," laughed Vyner, "when you have never been on a horse in your life!"

"Do not say that, Walter," answered Margaret, in her calm, assertive way; "dear father, when we were children, always kept ponies for us. I have often ridden."

"You'll break your neck if you try now," said Vyner, and he would not buy her a horse; but Margaret, without consulting him, went to a livery stable and hired one for a season.

The owner of the livery stable gave her a really quiet animal, and provided her with a groom and all other accessories, and Margaret surprised Vyner one day by riding up to his studio, really looking remarkably well.

He went down to speak to her, and Margaret immediately tried to gain her point.

"As you see, I can ride, dear," she said, "I am sure now you will buy me a horse?"

Vyner laughed.

"I won't make any rash promises," he said. "And now I advise you to get safely home."

But Margaret had no intention of not being seen in her new accomplishment as a horse-woman. She called on her old friend, Mrs. Saunders, and that kind woman admired her to her heart's content. She also saw poor Nellie's old lover, "little Puck," who still remained a bachelor, and gratified Margaret also by his open and admiring comments on her appearance.

She was so pleased and self-satisfied, that she determined next to call on Nora. As she rode up to Nora's door, unfortunately a troop of Life Guards were passing. This made a stir and a sort of crowd, and Margaret grew nervous. But her horse kept steady enough, when suddenly a horse, ridden by a man who was also passing, grew restive and reared, close to Margaret. The man tried to hold it in, but it seized the bit in its teeth, turned sharply, cannoned against Margaret's horse, and in a moment Margaret lost her unstable seat, and fell backwards, actually pulling her horse over on her. The animal plunged and kicked, some of the guardsmen at once dismounted, and Margaret was dragged from beneath the horse. She was quite insensible, and was carried to Nora's door, to keep her out of the crowd until an ambulance could be procured to convey her home.

The news of the accident soon reached Nora, who happened to be at home, and she ran to the door of the house to see if she could be of any assistance, and to ask if the poor lady who was hurt had not better be brought at once into the house.

When she saw Margaret's face she recognised her. It was Walter Vyner's wife—and with a suppressed cry Nora bade the men who were holding Margaret in their arms to carry her in.

"She is a friend of mine—take her into the house at once," she said; and so Margaret was carried in, and lay like one dead while Nora despatched messengers for doctors and for Vyner.

Margaret never spoke again. It was concussion of the brain, the doctors said, and she lingered alive for two days, but she never regained consciousness. The end came about midnight on the third night after the accident. Nora, who had scarcely left her, had been persuaded to lie down, and had fallen asleep, when her maid awoke her.

"What is the matter?" said Nora, starting up.

"You said we were to call you if there was any change," answered the maid. "Poor Mrs. Vyner is dead."

Nora at once ran into the room where Margaret lay. Vyner was standing by the bed, pale, grave, and sorrowful, and he held out his hand to his old friend as she ran in.

"Poor Margaret!" he said. And as Nora stood and looked with tearful eyes at Margaret's still face, she too murmured "Poor, poor Margaret!"

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We notice the footsteps of time but by epochs. "To-morrow, and to-morrow, nd to-morrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day." But suddenly on some "to-morrow" comes a change. Then we count the hours—say on such and such a day he died—on such a day was born. And so in the revolving days and months that passed after Margaret's sudden death; Nora and Vyner scarcely noted them, until one day, when these two — who once were lovers, who each in truth had loved no other—suddenly broke through the half-sad, half-tender reserve which had been between them since the day that Margaret died.

They were standing together in Nora's drawing-room in the twilight. Outside was the hum and stir of the mighty city; inside a great stillness and peace. Presently Vyner spoke.

"It is a year to-day, Nora," he said, "since—"

"Yes, I know," answered Nora softly, and her hand crept into his.

Not many words were said after this—strong, deep feeling is expressed in few words—but as the darkness stole around them, Nora's head fell on Vyner's breast.

"How have I lived," she half sobbed, "all these dreary, dreary years?"

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They were married very soon after this. Lady Stainbrooke could not restrain a little stab, in spite of her prudence, at Vyner on the occasion.

"So, you have got Nora and her great fortune, after all, Mr. Vyner!" she said.

"Yes," he answered, smiling; "I have been a lucky man." And so, indeed, he esteemed himself, but not because she had a great fortune.

After their marriage they went abroad for a whole year, and during their wanderings found themselves in the winter time at Monte Carlo. One day, while they were standing watching the players staking their gold at the tables,

they suddenly both recognised a face in the crowd. It was Lord Seaforth—he was standing watching with haggard, greedy eyes, a small stake that he had risked, and he looked miserably worn and aged. Nora felt sorry; she would even have spoken to him, but Vyner drew her away.

"It would only be painful to us all," he said; yet Nora could not easily forget the look of poverty, almost despair, which came over the young man's face when the trifle he had risked vanished away.

They heard after this that Lady Seaforth was living in Paris in great poverty also; having only a small annuity to live on, which was allowed her by Mr. Marchmont. Anonymously Nora now frequently sends this unhappy woman considerable sums of money; and Vyner, ever generous, is pleased that she should do this.

Strathearn is still unmarried. Once a year at least he comes to town, and never forgets to call on Joannah Brewis. He also never forgets to send her a haunch of venison in October, and various presents of game during the season.

"I don't like it," Joannah candidly confesses;

"but it pleases him, I suppose, poor man, and does me no harm, and so I make no objections."

There is another visit, too, which Strathearn never neglects to pay. This is to Nellie's grave. No one else goes near it now, but she is not forgotten—Strathearn loved her too well for her memory to fade in a human life.

THE END.

THE SILENT WATCHERS.

THE

SILENT WATCHERS.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT THEY SAW.

It was only a dreary picture. The afternoon of New Year's Day in a remote farm house, with the rain and sleet driving over the hills, and dashing against the kitchen window panes. Inside this kitchen also there were few signs that in the dark hours of the morning another year had been born.

Yet it was so. This was New Year's Day at Redcote Farm house, but the penurious habits of the master—the old farmer, George Rendall—had prevented the usual outward emblems of rejoicing and merriment being very visible. True, on the high mantelpiece, amid the

shining brass candlesticks, and show brass family kettle, a few faded sprigs of holly were to be seen. They had been placed there a week before, when all over the land the joy-bells were ringing for Christmas-tide. But no joy-bells stole over the hills in their sweet melody to Redcote Farm. Neither marriage bells nor passing bells, nor the solemn tolling of the last bells rung for us on earth, were to be heard in this silent and lonely place. Full three miles away was the nearest church in the neighbourhood, and so no sound of joy nor sorrow was was ever borne on the wind to Redcote Farm.

In this remote and quiet spot George Rendall, the farmer, had lived eighty-five years. He had been born here, spent his childhood and boyhood here, brought his wife here, and now old, shrivelled, and blear-eyed, he sat watching the fire, thinking vaguely that this was New Year's Day—thinking vaguely of the New Year's Days gone by—of the old days, of the long journey, not of the rest which now should have seemed so near!

He had not a good face, this aged man, tottering on the verge of the grave. The lines and wrinkles which years had scored, told no

story of endured pain, of noble, patient resolve, no tale of benevolence nor love. But they had written with their truth-telling hand of hard bargains, of petty schemes, of toil perhaps, for he had been a hard worker in his day; but he had toiled, and worked, and thought for money, and for money's worth alone.

There was nothing like it, he thought. The one narrow creed that filled his heart and soul was gain. Yet he could no longer enjoy it, though this idea never occurred to his mind. His thin legs could scarcely carry his thin, poor body, his hands were crippled with rheumatism, his bones all aches and pains. But he loved the music, that the clink of gold makes, still! When a horse or a cow died, he wept maudlin tears; when a neighbour died he shook his head and grunted, and began to consider when the dead man's farm stock should be sold, and and if it were likely to go cheap beneath the auction hammer.

His household consisted of two sons, a niece, and a strong country girl. On this particular New Year's Day, Robert Rendall, the younger son, was from home spending his holidays, and the inhabitants of the farmhouse were thus

reduced to four. The old man, his eldest son George Rendall, his niece Maud Eliot, and a maid-servant named Jean or Jenny Wren. As the old man sat dozing over the fire, Maud Eliot, the niece, entered the kitchen, and began to move restlessly about.

"Where's George, uncle?" she said at last.

The old man looked round with a chuckle, and an evil gleam in his eye.

"Thou's always looking after George, Maudie, more than he's looking after thee," he said.

Maud Eliot's face turned scarlet at this taunt. She stood behind her uncle, and clenched her hands and bit her lips. But she did not speak, and with another chuckle the old farmer turned from his niece and began once more gazing idly into the fire; and presently, overcome by the warmth, he feel asleep.

In the meanwhile, Maud Eliot had gone to the kitchen window, and stood there looking out with a gloomy expression on her face at the driving sleet and rain.

She was a pale girl this, with dark eyes and hair, with a certain beauty and power in her countenance, which, however, was scarcely handsome. She looked just now as if she were

alike anxious, angry, and unhappy. Her natural pallor was increased by the strong and passionate feelings of her heart.

Suddenly the pale face flushed, and the full, strong mouth moved tremulously. These emotions were caused by the sound of a man's footsteps outside the kitchen door, and in another moment a tall, good-looking—nay, a handsome young man, entered the kitchen.

This was George Rendall, the farmer's eldest son. He was twenty-seven, tall, straight-featured, and powerfully made, with careless, laughing blue eyes, and a sensual though handsome mouth. A slightly-annoyed expression passed over his face when he saw his cousin Maud Eliot standing by the window.

"Well, Maud, are you meditating on the rain?" he said, addressing her.

"It is a dreary day," answered Maud, in one of those voices which it is pleasant to listen to.

"Disgusting, isn't it?" said the young man. "And with a long ride before one, too!"

"A long ride?" repeated Maud. "Surely, George, you are not going from home to-day?—not on New Year's Day?"

"Why not?" said George Rendall. "It

isn't so agreeable here, is it? You are cross, the old man is crosser, and little Jenny Wren has declined to clean my boots!"

"How dare she!" exclaimed Maud passionately.

George Rendall shrugged his shoulders.

"You women, my dear," he said, in a slightly contemptuous tone, "are wonderful creatures! You are either ready to do anything for a man—cut your throats, etc.—or you are the most disagreeable, disobliging, contradictious beings upon earth! As I was saying, you are cross, Jenny Wren is cross—"

"Don't name me with Jenny Wren, please," interrupted Maud yet more angrily.

George Rendall gave a careless laugh.

"All right," he said. "Never name any woman to another—they all hate each other—they all—"

"George," again interrupted Maud, "how dare you speak to me thus? How dare you talk to me of Jenny Wren, or any one else? Have you no feeling? You are a bad, bad, wicked man!"

"Go on, my dear," said George Rendall, with another shrug.

"Go on!" said Maud, raising her voice; "but what is the use of going on to a cruel, heartless man like you? You are worthless, you are worthless!" she repeated with strong passion. "You are unworthy to live—you do no good—nothing, nothing but harm!"

"Pleasant, blowing a man up like this on New Year's Day!" said George Rendall. "But I'm out of it. Don't sit up for me, Maud, I won't be home till late—I'm going to the Fothergal's."

"To make love to Mary Fothergal, I suppose," said Maud bitterly.

"Please yourself," answered George Rendall. "I'm going, that's all. Good-day, Maud—I hope you'll be in a better humour to-morrow." And with a careless nod the young man turned away, while Maud Eliot gave a long-drawn, quivering sigh.

"He is unworthy—he is unworthy," she was thinking. "It is his good looks—only his good looks—would that God would strike him dead, or make him plain, hideous, miserable, as I am now!"

. . . . . .

When the stars, the silent watchers of the

night, shone out from among the drifting clouds on the eventide of this New Year's Day, they shone on this pale, passionate girl standing at her bedroom window, with a look of desperate and determinate resolve on her face.

She was going to run away. She was sick and weary of her bondage. Her cousin, her lover, George Rendall, had utterly changed to her. The sweetness and devotion of the summer days had cooled in autumn, and frozen in the chill winter months. He loved her no longer; he was weary of her; and she had loved him too well. He was one of those who would have been passionately enamoured with a heartless coquette. A woman to have retained his affections should have tantalised and provoked him. A woman who gave him too much was certain to tire him. He was not generous, and did not understand nor appreciate generosity. A small, cold heart beat beneath his tall, handsome, and well-made form.

And Maud Eliot knew all this now. She knew she loved a bad, hard man, and yet she could not help loving him still. The lonely life, the silence and stillness of Redcote Farm, kept

her passion for her cousin ever present in her mind. In a crowd we are forced to think of the crowd. But when we have the stars and the hills alone for company, dangerous temptations and powerful influences are apt to beset the human heart.

She was going away from Redcote Farm—to fly, to hide herself—she knew not where. She had, indeed, no other home to go to. Her father had been an unsuccessful doctor in London, who had married, rather late in life, old Rendall's wife's sister. Two years ago Dr. Eliot had died, and left his only child, Maud, unprovided for. On his deathbed he had written a letter to the old farmer at Redcote, asking him to take charge of his orphan girl. The old farmer was furious on receiving this appeal, which only reached him after his brother-in-law was lying in his grave. But young George Rendall, after some difficulty, persuaded his father to accept the responsibility. Young George Rendall had three reasons for doing this. One was that he was good-natured when his own selfishness did not interfere with his benevolence; another that he thought the house would be more comfortable with a lady to manage it, for his mother was dead; and his

third reason was that he wished to go to London, and so made an excuse of bringing his young cousin down.

This journey proved an unfortunate one to the orphaned Maud Eliot. When her handsome cousin George arrived for her at the somewhat gloomy house where her father had died, half her troubles seemed to be over. George was kind, and apparently considerate, and as the cousins travelled on together over the snowy country (it was mid-winter), Maud felt almost ashamed to feel so happy so soon after her poor father's death.

We have seen how these joyous hours ended. Without thinking of his character, judging the man's heart and soul by the fair outward lineaments in which they were clothed, the hapless girl too soon learned to love him. The love of woman was pleasant to George Rendall, and the voice of honour and conscience only dull to his ears. Two years had passed since Maud Eliot had come to Redcote in mid-winter—years of hope, joy, intense happiness, then of dull, cold disappointment and bitter pain.

He had broken her heart, she told herself, as she dragged her dresses and clothes out of the

old-fashioned chest of drawers in her room on this New Year's night, when she had resolved to go for ever from Redcote.

White-faced, trembling, with her dark eyes fixed and dilated, the girl went on with her task. The clock on the stair-head struck nine, and after the last stroke there was great silence in the house, as there had been before. Outside, the wind had died away, and the sky had cleared, and all over the heavens the stars twinkled and shone. They were watching her, the girl thought — watching her, and she shivered and shuddered beneath those countless eyes.

Then suddenly she paused and clasped her hands, and listened with parted lips, as she knelt before her half-filled trunk. What was that sound breaking the stillness of the night? Those cries sharp and terrible, that reached her ears from below? They were a woman's shrieks, and Maud Eliot's face turned absolutely ghastly as she heard them.

She rose from her knees, she staggered to the room door, and then she heard her uncle, old Rendall, the farmer, calling out in the thin and broken tones of age.

Tottering, holding on by the banister, she went downstairs. At the foot of the stairs the girl Jenny Wren was lying, apparently in a fit. Her hands were clenched, her teeth were set, her eyes were starting from her head, and her dress and arms were stained with blood. Old Rendall was standing beside her, looking like a man suddenly roused from his sleep, and a lantern was lying on the passage oil-cloth, as if the girl Jenny had dropped it from her hand.

"What is the matter?" asked Maud Eliot, speaking as though she were forcing the words from her lips.

"Matter! Devil knows," answered the old farmer. "Jenny has come in shrieking and screaming like a mad thing, and look, Maudie—look, her hands and arms are all blood! What can have befallen her? I sent her to lock up the stable door and the byre a while ago, and then I dozed over a bit, and when I woke, there she lay screaming and shrieking—surely she's fallen somehow. Help me with her, lass, and we'll get her into the kitchen, and give her a drop of whisky to bring her round."

Maud made no answer. She helped to lift

up the girl, she unfastened the handkerchief round her neck, and she bathed her face and hands all in silence. She shuddered when she touched Jenny's hands—the stained hands—but she never spoke a word. Then the old man got out his whisky bottle, and forced some of its contents between Jenny's set teeth. The strong spirit soon revived her. The girl sat up, stared wildly about for a moment or two, and then seized the old farmer by the hand.

"Master!" she said in a loud, harsh voice. "Master, go and look at Mr. George!"

"George—what's the matter with George?" asked the old farmer. "He's away at Fothergal's, and won't be home till late—the girl's dement!"

"He's lying," said Jenny, still in the same loud excited tones, "in the loft over the stable—he's lying dead!"

"Dead!" echoed the farmer. "Why thou's mad, lass! George went to Fothergal's hours ago. Thou's seen a ghost—thy wits are gone!"

"He's lying dead!" repeated the girl, and she once more began shrieking and screaming, and fell off the chair in which they had placed

her, and began rolling in convulsions on the kitchen floor.

"She's mad," said old Rendall, "utterly mad! Lock the doors, Maud, lass—George won't be home till late—and try to get the girl to bed."

Then Maud spoke.

"Uncle," she said, in husky accents, "let us go and look for George."

"For George! Art thou mad, too? George is at Fothergal's, I tell thee, and won't be home till dawn, most like. Get the girl to bed, and get to bed thyself. I'll sit up for George."

Maud said nothing more. She half-dragged, half-lifted, the now nearly insensible Jenny Wren to the little bedroom, or rather hutch in the kitchen wall, where she usually slept. The girl groaned and moaned, but the strength of the spirit which the old man had poured down her throat held her senses in bondage, and presently she fell into a heavy stupor or sleep.

The old farmer also soon dozed again in his easy-chair by the fire. Only Maud Eliot kept awake—only the dark restless eyes never closed, and the restless clutchings of her hands never ceased. Sometimes she moaned aloud and her mind wandered—wandered back to when she

was a child—to her dead father—to the summer days of sunshine and joy, to the chill autumn, and then to the black winter which of late had fallen on her soul.

Was she going mad? she suddenly asked herself. Mad! There was her old uncle dozing by the fire—there was the girl Jenny Wren lying in her heavy sleep. *Where was George?* She started up—she opened the kitchen shutter, and looked out at the thousand thousand myriads of stars twinkling in the heavens. They saw, she thought—they saw George now—and she fell down on her knees, and covered her face, groaning aloud in the anguish of her soul.

CHAPTER II.

BY DAYLIGHT.

About midnight the old farmer awoke. The fire had burnt low, the candle was flickering in the socket, and the old man was cold, cross, and captious.

He pulled out his big silver watch, and began scolding his niece.

"What's thou sitting up for, thou fool," he said, "at this hour? Waiting for George, I warrant. Ay, thou'll wait in vain—George will ha' nothing to say to thee."

Maud never spoke, but by chance her uncle's eyes fell on her face.

"Why, lass!" he exclaimed, staring at the girl, "what's come o'er thee? Thou looks an old woman—like thy old aunt, when we put her in her coffin!"

"I'm tired," said Maud, in a low, feeble voice of pain.

"Tired! Then get to bed," answered the old man. "George won't come now, he's staying all night at Fothergal's."

"Let us go and look for him," said Maud, in the same feeble voice, "his horse may have come back."

"Nonsense — rubbish!" said old Rendall. "The girl's demented — what's the matter with ye all to-night? First Jenny, and then thou. Get to bed, lass, get to bed." And grasping his whisky bottle in one hand, and his bedroom candlestick in the other, the old farmer tottered out of the kitchen.

But Maud never went to bed. She sat there till the grey, cold winter dawn struggled into the kitchen window-panes. There was no fire, no light. But she had never noticed this. She noticed, however, when the chill daylight began to creep over the world, and she rose and went across the kitchen, and stood looking for a few moments at the still sleeping girl, Jenny Wren.

A handsome woman was this Jenny, of the coarse and somewhat full-blown type. Her skin was white, her cheeks were rosy, her eyes small, brown, and unintellectual. Her nose

also was small and neatly formed, while her mouth was thick and large, and her jaw square and determined-looking. Her form was full, broad, and developed, and as Maud stood watching her, a look of disgust and scorn came over her own pale, passionate face.

Then she turned silently away, and leaving the kitchen, she went up to her own bedroom, and began quickly to replace all her dresses and clothes in the chest of drawers as they had been before she dragged them out on the previous evening. When she had done this, she returned to the kitchen and awoke Jenny.

"Get up, Jenny," she said, "it is past seven o'clock."

The girl Jenny could scarcely rouse herself. She sat up in bed, she rubbed her eyes, and stared in a sort of stupefied way at Maud. Then she looked frightened, and began to cry.

"Oh! Miss Maud," she said, "was I dreaming—or—or—is Mr. George really dead?"

"What do you mean, Jenny?" asked Maud.

"He is lying in the loft," wept Jenny. "I thought I saw him lying in the loft! I lifted him up, Miss Maud — Oh! — Oh! — it was

so awful!" And Jenny wept louder than before.

"Hush, girl," said Maud, sternly. "If you saw anything—really saw anything—in the loft, come now and tell my uncle."

Jenny trembled, shivered, and cried, but finally, on being urged by Maud, she rose, and together the two women went up to the old farmer's room.

He scowled angrily when the girls awoke him, scowled and swore; called Jenny a "cursed fool," and Maud an "idle, fanciful hussy.' But at last unwillingly he rose, and shuffled his "shrunk shanks" into his brown woollen stockings and grey knee-breeches, and grumbling and coughing he went downstairs, followed by the girls.

Then he unlocked the back door of the house, and limped and tottered out into the wet and slushy farmyard. This was enclosed in a square of farm-buildings ; the stables being at the opposite side to the house. Over the stables was a roomy and commodious loft, which when a youth, George Rendall the younger had fitted up for a workshop. Here the two younger Rendall's kept all their peculiar belongings ;

their fishing tackle, their guns, their best gardening and farming utensils were all stored here. George also, who had a taste for drawing, would sometimes take an industrious fit, and draw for hours by the loft window, which was furnished with a deal table, and which looked out on the pleasant green meadows beyond.

He generally wrote his letters here also, and often smoked here, so that the loft was regarded in the establishment at the farm as belonging to "George," in particular, though the younger brother Robert occasionally used it.

Grumbling and swearing then, the old farmer made straight for the loft in the pale, cold light of the winter morning. Behind him, with a white set face, walked Maud Eliot, and shrinking, cowering and crying, after her came the girl Jenny Wren.

"Ay, this is a nice fool's errand," growled the old man as he unlocked the stable door. "George, indeed—George is at Fothergal's—but ye are jealous of him, lasses, that's it—jealous of him both of ye."

The lock was soon turned, and the stable door was open. A broad-stepped ladder led to the loft. Up this the old farmer panting and swear-

ing now ascended. His head and body had disappeared into the loft; but his thin legs and feet were still on the ladder, when the two women below heard him give a cry.

"George, my lad, George!" he said, and the next moment, more quickly than his age warranted, he sprang into the loft, and the two white-faced, fear-stricken girls followed.

This is what they saw. George—the handsome George Rendall—was sitting in a chair before the table by the loft window. His head had fallen on the table, his hands hung limply down. They drew nearer—there was blood on his bright brown hair, blood on the table, blood on the floor! And his face! It was crushed down on some verses he had been writing out; crushed out of shape, out of the fair lineaments which had won the love of woman so easily, crushed and broken; for his murderer or murderess had struck him from behind, struck him on the head with a leaden-topped hammer, which now lay on the floor near him, and to which some of his bright hair still clung.

At this terrible sight, Jenny Wren fell shrieking on the floor, while Maud Eliot stood,

looking grey and cold, looking as if she were turned to stone. The old man seemed scarcely to understand at first.

"George! George!" he kept crying; but George's spirit had winged its flight from earth, hours before that grey chill dawn. He was stiff and cold; he had died apparently as his head fell beneath the crushing blow which had destroyed his life, for there were no signs of any struggle, nor even of a brief death agony.

At last the old man seemed to realise that his son was dead, and then he turned fiercely and accusingly to the two women.

"Which o' ye ha' done it?" he said, and he kicked the shrinking Jenny with his foot.

"Thou fool!" (and he swore a terrible oath), "I've had my eye on ye! What! did ye come behind, and knock the lad on the head because you were jealous mad o' him? But ye shall hang for't! Hang! ay, hang, if there's law in the land—ye shall be hanged by the neck till ye're dead!"

These words seemed to recall Jenny's scattered senses. She ceased shrinking; she rose to her feet.

"I didn't do it, master," she said. "He was

a bad man," she added, vindictively enough, "he's got his due, maybe, but not from me—though I've had good cause to rue I ever saw his face!"

"Ay," said the old farmer, savagely, "he was a handsome lad, and none of ye would let him be! His blood was on thy hands last night thou foul jade, when thou came to the house shrieking and screaming like a mad thing. Thou'd struck the blow then. Don't lie about it—thou's killed my lad!"

"I didn't, master," said Jenny, emphatically. "I went out to lock in, as ye know, and I had the lantern wi' me, and I thought I would ha' a look among George's things. I came up the ladder from the stable—I mind it all now, though my head has been stupid-like ever since; but I came up wi' the lantern in my hand, and I saw him" (and Jenny pointed shudderingly to George's corpse). "I took hold of him. I saw he was dead, and I ran mad-like to the house, and I mind nothing more till Miss Maud called me this morning. This is the truth, master. I know nothing more."

. . . . . .

About twelve o'clock the inspector of police

at Norsely, which was the nearest police-station to Redcote, arrived at the farm, accompanied by two of his men. This inspector came into the kitchen of the house in a pleasant, friendly way, and shook old Rendall by the hand.

"This is a bad job, Mr. Rendall." he said.

The old farmer took out his red-cotton pocket handkerchief, and began to wipe his eyes.

"Who did it, Mr. Pye? That's what I ask —who did it?" said old Rendall.

Mr. Abel Pye, the inspector, smiled benevolently. He was a big, tall, fat man this, who spent his life in ferreting out crimes, but by the expression of his face you would not have supposed that he believed in the existence of evil. He had such a trustful, beaming look, and had a most agreeable manner, even when he was arresting a man. He therefore smiled benevolently, when old Rendall asked, in the querulous tone of age, who could be the murderer of his son.

"We must find out, Mr. Rendall," he said; "no doubt we shall find out." And then, accompanied by his men, he went to view the body of the murdered man.

The arrival of the police seemed to throw

Jenny Wren into a terrible flutter. She hated the sight of them, she said; and when they returned to the kitchen to take the depositions of the inhabitants of the farm, Mr. Abel Pye's smiling and benevolent eyes followed Jenny's movements with looks of great admiration and interest.

"Some tramp must ha' done it, Mr. Pye," said Jenny boldly enough, before she had been asked any questions.

"A tramp," answered Mr. Inspector, smiling, "You think it was a tramp then, my dear? But it must have been a funny tramp, if it was a tramp—a well-to-do tramp, a tramp of means—for in the poor lad's pockets there was this money—three sovereigns, and fourteen shillings in silver." And the inspector held out the money he had named in his hand.

"Three sovereigns, and fourteen shillings in silver!" repeated old Rendall, rising from his chair hastily, and peering eagerly into the inspector's open hand. "I'll just take charge of it then, Mr. Pye."

"Not at present, Mr. Rendall," said Mr. Pye blandly and considerately. "For the present it must remain in my charge."

"Three sovereigns, and fourteen shillings in silver," again said old Rendall, as if he were thinking aloud; "then George must ha' kept back some of the money he got for the turnips —I thought he did."

"And this well-to-do tramp," continued Mr. Pye, still looking smilingly at Jenny, "must also have despised taking poor Mr. George's handsome gold watch and Albert chain—for here they are." And the inspector held up a watch and chain as he spoke.

"Ay," said old Rendall eagerly, "that's George's watch, sure enough. His mother bought it for him out of the butter money the day he was twenty-one. You'll not take that away, surely, from the farm, Mr. Pye?"

"For the present," answered Mr. Pye; "but it will be quite safe, Mr. Rendall. When we've caught our hare you shall have it back."

Then in the most agreeable manner in the world Mr. Pye began to question Jenny.

"Take care what you say, my dear, mind," he said; "only just tell me what you saw when you went to lock in?"

Jenny repeated the same story that she had told old Rendall in the loft.

She thought she would like to "ha' a look at George's things," she said, and she blushed scarlet.

The inspector made no comment on the girl's tale; none when Maud Eliot told him that she knew nothing. "She had seen her cousin George," she said, "in the kitchen after dinner, and he had then told her he was going to Fothergal's farm. She had spent the most of the evening in her own room, sorting her things, until Jenny's cries had attracted her attention. She had seen her cousin's body first, when she saw it with her uncle."

Mr. Inspector took his notes, and then made arrangements with the old farmer for the coroner's inquest to be held on George Rendall's body the next day. He would leave one of his men at the farm, he said, and after a lengthened private conversation with this man the inspector took a friendly leave of them all—including Jenny—and went smiling on his way.

CHAPTER III.

SUSPICION.

The next day was one of continual excitement at Redcote Farm. Up the quiet lane that led to the house, which, as a rule, was so seldom trodden by the feet of men or the feet of women, a constant stream of visitors was to be seen.

The coroner's inquest on George Rendall's body was held in the parlour of the farmhouse, about twelve o'clock. Indeed, there was no other house near enough to the scene of the murder for it to be held in. The jury viewed the body in the loft first, and then a lengthened inquiry was held in the parlour.

But nothing further was discovered. Jean, or Jenny, Wren somewhat stumbled and contradicted herself, however, in giving her evidence. She was asked when she had last

seen the murdered man before (as she had previously stated) she found his dead body in the loft.

Upon this question being asked, Jenny blushed and fidgetted.

"I cannot call to mind quite," she said.

"What!" said the Coroner. "Not when you saw your young master before you discovered him lying dead? Did you see him after dinner?"

Jenny twisted her stout, comely form about uneasily.

"Did you see him after dinner?" repeated the Coroner.

"Yes," said Jenny, as if unwilling.

"Where?" asked the Coroner.

Again Jenny hesitated. Then she said—

"I saw him in the stable. He said he was going to Fothergal's."

"Had you a long conversation? What else did he say?" was then asked.

"I can't call to mind," said Jenny. "I'm not very certain I did see him in the stable—but I think so—I'd had a host to do that day with it being the New Year, and we had a bit better dinner nor usual, though it wasn't much.

Still it put other things out of my head—George wanted his boots—"

"Then you did see him?" inquired the Coroner severely.

"I—I--think so," hesitated Jenny, and on the whole her evidence gave an unfavourable impression against her.

But she held fast to her original story about the manner in which she found George's body.

"Master sent me to lock in," she said, "and before I locked the stable up, as I had the lantern wi' me, I thought I would ha' a look at George's things."

"Had you any particular motive for examining his things?" inquired the Coroner.

Again Jenny blushed and fidgetted.

"I wanted to know something," she said. "Folks talked about him keeping company wi' Mary Fothergal—and—I wanted to know."

"Oh!" said the Coroner, and he looked at Mr. Inspector Pye, who smiled pleasantly in reply to the Coroner's glance.

Then old Rendall was called. He looked old, shaken, and broken down, and he proved that there was no other person known to be on the farm premises on New Year's Day but himself,

his unfortunate son George, and his niece Maud Eliot, and the servant-maid Jenny Wren. His two lads were enough to work the farm in the slack time, he said; in the spring, summer, and harvest time, they engaged help. But during the three winter months George and Robert did what was needed. He had lost his right hand when he lost George. And the old man began to whimper when he concluded his statement.

He was asked if he knew of anyone who bore ill-will to his deceased son.

Then old Rendall hesitated, shot an evil glance of his bleared eyes at Jenny Wren, and then at Maud Eliot. But finally, after considering a few moments, he said he did not.

Maud Eliot's evidence was simply a repetition of what she had stated on the previous day to Inspector Pye. But she also was asked if she had seen her unfortunate cousin after the dinner hour was past.

"Yes," answered Maud, in a low but clear voice; "he came into the kitchen and told me he was going to Mr. Fothergal's. He said we were not to sit up for him, as he might be late."

"Did he seem in good spirits? Was he excited in any way?" asked the Coroner.

"He seemed in his usual spirits," replied Maud, "and he showed no particular excitement—only a few words passed between us."

After this, at the request of Mr. Inspector Pye, the inquest was adjourned. It was adjourned for a week; but before Mr. Inspector Pye left the farmhouse, he politely asked Jenny Wren for the dress she had worn on the previous day, and the apron. Upon this, Jenny grew very angry.

"The apron was washed," she said; "and as for the dress, they might look at it if they liked, but the marks on it were got when she lifted poor George up after he was dead. She didn't do it. They needn't all glare at her like that—she wished she had never come to Redcote Farm—had never seen George Rendall's face." And Jenny ended by bursting into a fit of loud and passionate weeping.

Mr. Inspector Pye smiled more pleasantly than ever after this outbreak.

"It was foolish of you to wash your apron, Jenny," he said; "however, my dear, washed or unwashed, I must carry it away with me."

And he did carry it away with him. He also carried away the verses, all stained and

gory with George's blood, on which the young man's crushed head was resting when his father and Maud Eliot went into the loft. He took away again, also, the watch and chain (though old Rendall applied for them), but he left two policemen behind him this time, and Jenny Wren was conscious that these men, and indeed all the visitors who arrived at the farm, looked at her curiously. She was suspected of murdering her young master, in fact, and no doubt various suspicious causes pointed towards this supposition.

But she put a bold front upon it. She went about her work, and tossed her handsome head when people stared at her. Maud Eliot never looked at her. She gave her orders to Jenny as usual, but she never once glanced in the girl's bold, good-looking face.

During the afternoon, and after the first inquiry or inquest was over, Maud was summoned downstairs by Jenny, who informed her "the parson from Norsely had arrived now—she wondered who next."

Maud went down into the parlour, and found the Rev. Mr. Stivers, the Vicar of Norsely, waiting to speak to her.

Redcote Farm was in Mr. Stivers's parish. This outlying, lonely spot was more than three miles from Norsely, but Mr. Stivers had started on the uneven way which parted him from his parishioners at Redcote, from a sense of moral duty or curiosity, the moment that he conveniently could, after he had heard of the murder.

"They were a bad lot," he said to Mrs. Stivers, as he buttoned on his overcoat, and enveloped his neck in a knitted choker, to protect him during his coming journey.

Mrs. Stivers knew what "a bad lot" meant in her husband's vocabulary. It meant the Redcote people did not go to church; did not weekly refresh their souls with his sermons of emptiness. It meant he got nothing from Redcote—the "old heathen," as he called old Rendall, declining to put a penny, or even a turkey, into the parson's hands. Therefore the parson was satisfied that they were all lost souls. The terrible tragedy that had happened in the household was a judgment upon them, and Mr. Stivers felt no small inward satisfaction at this idea. As he neared the farm in the jolting dog-cart in which he was driving, and

passed on the road a flock of large, beautiful, fat, black turkeys, he thought again of the merited misfortune which had befallen the Rendalls. On Christmas Day he dined off goose—how could a poor parson afford to give sixteen or eighteen shillings for a good turkey? And here were twenty turkeys at least walking in their lakadaisical way along his parishioner's homestead!

He was still thinking of his injuries, when Maud Eliot entered the farmhouse parlour and found him standing there.

"Ah! Miss Eliot," he said, holding out two fat fingers, "this is a mournful occasion—a crushing blow!"

"It is very sad," answered Maud in a low tone.

"It is terrible!" said Mr. Stivers, with energy. "Cut down like a blade of grass—like an ear of corn—like a—" But here the parson paused for lack of a metaphor; and Maud also was silent.

"I called," continued Mr. Stivers, after a few moments' consideration, "from a sense of duty. Your uncle and the members of his family have not sought my spiritual aid—have not listened

to my words of—I may say comfort and persuasion—but in times like these, I do not wish to remember this. I come not to reproach, nor as a judge—I come—well—first to hear all the particulars of this terrible tragedy ?"

"They are very few," answered Maud, in the same low tone in which she had previously spoken. "My cousin was found dead—"

But we need not go into all the painful details which Mr. Stivers forced from Maud's white, unwilling lips. The parson was determined to hear everything.

"Terrible !" he exclaimed, walking up and down the parlour. "It makes one's blood run cold—absolutely freezes the—the life current !" And he patted his broad, stout chest, with a vigorous pat.

"And he was an alien to his church, too," he continued, still walking up and down the parlour, "a stranger to the warmth of my pastoral wings." And Mr. Stivers held out his arms to indicate that these were the "pastoral wings" that he alluded to.

Indeed, he was very fond of alluding to these "pastoral wings," and rather liked offering one of them to any pretty young parishioner who

happened to be in need of an escort. He was a strictly moral man, but still he preferred a young woman to an old one to lean on his wing.

"And do your suspicions point to anyone, my dear young lady?" proceeded the parson. "I have heard rumours—as I came along—rumour with its busy tongue pointed to the maid-servant! Do your suspicions turn in the same direction?"

"I judge no one," answered Maud, almost harshly. "What right has anyone to judge?"

The parson was nettled.

"I did not say judge, Miss Eliot," he said pettishly. "I am not given to judge hastily or uncharitably—I said suspicions."

"I mistook your meaning," said Maud coldly.

"You did," replied Mr. Stivers. But at this moment his eyes happened to fall on the green before the windows of the house, where the large flock of turkeys that he had coveted were now pensively walking. This changed the current of his ideas.

"You have fine turkeys here," he said, contemplatively, and he went to the window of the room to have a better look at them.

"They are fine this year, I think," replied Maud.

"Very," said the parson, smacking his lips. "We poor clergymen, Miss Eliot, cannot afford to buy such luxuries—but may I ask the cost of one of these in the market?"

"I really do not know," said Maud. "We only rear them for home use."

Mr. Stivers sighed, and looked contemplatively at the turkeys again. How lucky farmers were, he was thinking. But while his mind yet dwelt on the good things which the tillers of the ground had in such abundance wandering about their own doors, Robert Rendall entered the parlour, as he wished to speak to the parson about the arrangements for his unfortunate brother's funeral.

"Ah, Mr. Robert," said Mr. Stivers, and again he held out his two fat fingers, which was his usual mode of handshaking. "I was admiring your turkeys," he continued, still staring at the birds outside.

"Yes, they're a pretty good lot this year," answered young Robert.

"Splendid," said the parson, and again his lips gave an unconscious smack. "I was just

saying to your cousin here that such luxuries are out of the reach of a poor clergyman—yet I own I am partial to the bird."

Robert Rendall gave a little laugh.

"I am sure," he said, "if you will honour us by accepting one, Mr. Stivers, we shall be very happy."

Mr. Stivers's face beamed all over.

"You are very good," he said. "I accept one with pleasure, Mr. Robert—I accept also the kindly, friendly spirit in which it is offered. I shall have pleasure in eating it—I shall regard it—as—shall I say, an olive-branch? A token of more friendly relations between us—and I hope, Mr. Robert, to see your cousin here and yourself on Sunday in your pew in church. Let it be no longer empty! Come once more and listen to your pastor's voice!"

Again Robert Rendall gave a little laugh, but the parson was too much pleased with his turkey to be easily ruffled. He went with Robert to view poor George's body, and the exact spot where it was discovered. He sighed, he pointed a moral, but there was no longer bitterness on his tongue. Even when old Rendall pretended not to hear a word he said, and only

shook his head and gave a little whimper in reply to the parson's wordy sentences of condolence and sympathy, the parson was only pitiful and condescending.

"The infirmities of age!" he said. "The slow, the gradual decay of nature! Ah, poor man, we must pity him, truly pity him!" And the parson turned away from the old man with a smile on his lips; but the old man looked after him with an angry scowl.

"Thou's a nice wind-bag," he muttered. "Words, words, nothing but words—ay, they came cheap to thee. If thou'd to pay for them, Mr. Parson, I warrant wi' wouldn't ha' such a dose."

CHAPTER IV.

THE PARSON'S WIFE.

A MELANCHOLY procession left the homestead at Redcote early on the following morning. This was the funeral of George Rendall—the funeral of the young man who had been born there, whose light step and handsome face had filled his mother's heart with joy and gladness almost from his birth, and even the sour old father had felt a certain amount of pride and pleasure whenever he looked on his comely son.

They had carried him into the house the night before, and laid him in his coffin. But Maud Eliot had never once looked on his changed face. She felt that she could not. She wished to see him alone, but without creating remark this was impossible now.

The night before, Jenny Wren, who was in

a semi-hysterical condition, had asked Maud to go with her into the room where George's body lay.

"Do come, Miss Maud," said the girl, and would have taken Maud's hand, but Maud shrank back. "They say he's awful to look at," continued Jenny, "but he's stretched now, and I would just like to see him once more."

"I cannot," said Maud, and Jenny would not go without her.

But as they carried him out of the house, let us for a moment look at these two women. Ill had it been for both that they had ever seen his comely face. He had brought trouble to them, and sorrow and shame, and when the men were carrying him away for ever, Jenny's shrieks and cries were to be heard all over the house.

But from Maud Eliot's locked bedroom no cry came forth. The girl had flung herself on the floor, and lay there, white, mute, and deadly cold. Her hands were clenched over her ears; there was no tear in her staring eyes. Then she crawled to the window and looked out. The hearse was standing at the door; Robert, Mr. Fothergal, and another

friend were there, too. Maud moaned aloud, and her head fell sharply against the sash of the window, and for a few minutes she lay unconscious. When she recovered, everything connected with the funeral was gone. Was it a dream? Was it all a dream? she thought. No—for at that instant a burly policeman strolled leisurely past the front of the house, looking as if time hung rather heavy on his hands. It was one of the men left in possession —one of the men left to watch the case, as Mr. Inspector Pye had said; and so Maud knew that it was all too real—that George Rendall, who had given such trouble and pain when alive, had left yet more grievous trouble and pain behind him.

They knew on whom it was to fall first, during the afternoon. Maud asked no questions of Robert Rendall, when her cousin returned to Redcote after the funeral, but Robert, who was a talkative young man, had much to tell her.

"Who do you think was in the church, Maud, sobbing like a child?" he said, "Mary Fothergal! I am told she says she was as good as engaged to poor George—but I don't believe

it!" And Robert looked curiously at his cousin.

This Mary Fothergal was a handsome young woman, the daughter of Mr. Fothergal who rented the farm next Redcote. Poor George Rendall had begun to go frequently to Fothergal's during the autumn preceding his murder.

"They say," continued Robert Rendall, "that the verses he was writing out, poor fellow, when he must have been struck dead, were to Mary. And they say, too, Maud," added Robert, sinking his voice into a whisper, "that a warrant has been taken out against Jenny Wren."

"Impossible! It cannot be!" cried Maud, and she turned deadly pale, and leaned for support against the back of a chair.

"They say so, at any rate," answered Robert. "Jenny was known to be jealous about Mary Fothergal, and she contradicted herself, and made a fool of herself before the Coroner. At all events, that's what I've heard; indeed, old Stivers told me after the funeral that he knew a warrant either was, or was going to be, taken out against Jenny."

Mr. Stivers' information proved correct.

During the afternoon, Mr. Inspector Pye, and another policeman arrived once more at Redcote, and after a few agreeable remarks upon the weather, Mr. Pye produced his warrant. Jenny's shrieks were something fearful to listen to, when she understood she was to leave Redcote with the police, and for the present to be detained at Norsely.

"I didn't do it," she said, falling on her knees on the kitchen floor. "He deserved what he got maybe, but I didn't do it. Master don't let them take me? Miss Maud," (and she crawled on her knees to where Maud was standing, and grasped her dress), "don't let them take me away."

Then Maud spoke, though she kept her eyes averted from the girl's face.

"Get up Jenny," she said. "Go quietly with Mr. Pye—you need not be afraid if you are not guilty—only the guilty shall suffer."

"Ay — I said thou would be hanged!" said old Rendall, vindictively regarding Jenny. "You've hit the right nail on the head, Mr. Pye—this foul jade murdered my lad."

Upon this Jenny started to her feet, and soundly abused her old master. But the girl's

entreaties and rage were alike unavailing. "Just for the present she was to be detained," Mr. Pye said blandly, and so Jenny was carried away in the policeman's dog-cart, and the farm homestead knew her no more.

She was taken to Norsely, and bound over to appear at the adjourned coroner's inquiry. This inquiry was held at Norsely, a week after the first one held at Redcote, and the final result of this second inquiry was, that Jenny was committed for trial at the ensuing Northern Assizes, charged with the wilful murder of George Rendall the younger, at Redcote Farm, on the First of January.

At this adjourned coroner's inquest, Maud Eliot was of course present as one of the witnesses. She was greatly overcome while giving her evidence, and considerable sympathy was felt for her.

One of those who sympathised greatly with this pale, dark-eyed, unhappy-looking girl, was Mrs. Stivers, the parson's wife. There is an old saying that grooms get like horses if they are constantly in the stables; but Mrs. Stivers had certainly not got like Mr. Stivers, after living with him for nearly ten years. She had a

handsome, pale, regular face, this young woman, and was therefore totally dissimilar to her somewhat coarse-featured, broad-nosed, pompous little spouse.

Mr. Stivers, however, regarded her as his inferior, alike mentally and bodily. He spoke to her, and of her, almost with compassionate lordliness.

"Ah, my good Mary," he would say (her name was Mary), "My Martha, rather, troubled as usual about many things."

But woe would certainly have betided his "Martha," if she had not been troubled about many things. Mr. Stivers was not rich, but he liked to have everything in perfect order in his modest household. His dinners he especially regarded with favour. The little woman who bore his name, studied his likes and dislikes in everything, cooked for him, and worried to get things right about him the whole day. Yet this little woman was no fool. She was gentle and compassionate, and was ever ready to help anyone who came in her way, and no harsh or unkind word was ever heard on her lips. How was it then, that she could reconcile herself to her fate? There was

a little green mound in the churchyard at Norsely, which, perhaps, partly accounted for it. Beneath this green mound lay sleeping her only boy, who had died in his third year—and the best part of the mother's heart lay with her babe in this quiet resting-place.

But she gave her duty, her life, to the dead babe's father, and the Rev. Gordon Stivers (his real name was Thomas Gordon Stivers, but he always dropped the Thomas), was quite satisfied, and regarded it as perfectly natural that his wife should adore him.

"Poor little wife!" he used sometimes to say, smiling, and Mary would smile in reply, and the Rev. Gordon thought how kind and amiable he was, and almost pitied the little woman for loving him too well.

On the day of the adjourned coroner's inquiry held at Norsely on the death of the unfortunate George Rendall, the parson and his wife, who were shopping in the little town, accidentally encountered the old farmer, George Rendall, his niece and son, on their way to the police station, where the inquiry was to be held.

The parson stopped and held out the patronising hand of peace. But the old farmer took

no heed of it, except by a little nod, and then went tottering, shuffling on, as fast as his thin legs could carry him.

The two young people were more courteous. They returned the parson's greeting, and while they were exchanging a few words, Mrs. Stivers's kindly brown eyes were resting with sympathy and compassion on Maud Eliot's pale and woe-stricken face.

"Poor, poor girl, what she must have suffered!" said the parson's gentle wife to her husband, the moment Maud and her cousin had moved on. "Dear Gordon, I feel so much for her—may I wait until the inquiry is over to speak to her—she looks as if she needed a friend so much?"

"My dear, she is not a regular attendant at church," replied the Rev. Gordon repressingly.

"But Redcote is so far from church," pleaded his Mary.

"True," said the parson, remembering the jolting his own bones had got when he had travelled a week ago over the uneven roads which lay between Norsely and Redcote. "But my love," he continued, looking at his watch, "it is impossible that you can remain to speak to

Miss Eliot, for it is already time you returned to your domestic duties at home, as your maid-servant is such a very inefficient cook. I will loiter about to hear the end of this inquiry, which grows interesting; but you run home, my Mary, and be particular that the turkey is brown, and about the bread sauce," he added, with interest.

His Mary, of course, ran home, and Mr. Stivers loitered about until the end of the inquiry, the result of which gave him every satisfaction. Jean, or Jenny Wren was committed on a charge of wilful murder, and was conveyed away, shrieking pitifully, to a cell in the police station.

But she presently had a visitor there. This was Maud Eliot. Telling her uncle and cousin (who adjourned to refresh themselves at a neighbouring public-house before starting for Redcote) that she had some shopping to do in the town, Maud really applied to Mr. Pye, the inspector, to be allowed to speak a few words to the unhappy prisoner.

Mr. Pye was a good-natured man and gallant.

"I cannot resist the prayer of beauty," he said; "but my dear young lady, do not let your

kind heart lead you away. I'm an old bird, and chaff ensnares me not. This Jenny of yours, I fear, is no better than the chaff. These shrieking women are generally bad 'uns."

"Still, I wish to see her," urged Maud, and so she did see her.

She saw the comely Jenny sitting crouched up together, with all the comeliness gone out of her face. Only terror was written there. Jenny had heard herself committed for wilful murder, and that seemed to her narrow mind as if she were already tried and condemned.

"I'm as good as hangit!" she kept repeating, rocking herself to and fro in her terrible misery and fear.

When she saw Maud she fell down on her knees

"Miss Maud, Miss Maud, I'm to be hangit!" she said. "Did you hear? It's a wicked, bitter shame—I'm to be hangit for what I didn't do!"

Then Maud tried to explain, and Jenny grew somewhat comforted.

"I'll not say I've been a good girl," she frequently confessed presently. "I know I've taken things I oughtened to have done—eggs and the like—and, Miss Maud, I may as well

make a clean breast of it now—I took a little pig—"

"A little pig!" repeated Maud.

"It was the last time the sow had 'em," continued Jenny, "and I told the old master she had six, but there was seven—and I took one—it was only a very little one—and I guv it to Jack Foster."

"Jack Foster, the poacher?" asked Maud.

"Ay, Jack Foster," replied Jenny. "He sometimes came about the place unbeknown to the master, and he'd set his heart on a little roasted pig—"

"And what else did you take, Jenny?" said Maud, as the girl paused in her confession.

"Nothing to speak on," answered Jenny, looking up with some spirit. "Of course, pins and hairpins, and the like, all servant girls take. But if I never speak again, Miss Maud—if I was hangit to-morrow, I'd sware still, I never lifted my hand against George!"

"I believe you," said Maud, slowly and painfully, "and—because I believe this, Jenny, I have come to see you now—come to tell you that at your trial you shall have counsel to defend you—a barrister to defend you."

CHAPTER V.

JOHN DALTON, BARRISTER.

JENNY WREN was not permitted to languish long in prison before her trial commenced. The crime of which she was charged took place on the 1st of January, and before the end of the same month Jenny was to be tried at the assizes held in the city of Dereham, Redcote Farm being in the county of Dereham.

In the meanwhile, Maud Eliot was trying to keep her promise to the suspected girl. She had to do this, however, without the knowledge of her uncle, for had old Rendall known that his niece was about to engage counsel to defend Jenny, he would unquestionably have turned Maud out of his house.

But Maud had an acquaintance in the large neighbouring town of Oldcastle, in whom she thought she could trust. This gentleman, Mr.

Henley Onslow, was a solicitor in good practice, and of undoubted ability, though his witty and sarcastic tongue could not resist a finely-tempered stab, even if his pocket, which was very often the case, had to pay for it. He was also a man of considerable literary talent and taste, and in his early youth had formed a friendship for Maud Eliot's father, who when a young man had varied his occupations between professional doctoring and unprofessional authorship.

Maud Eliot remembered Mr. Onslow coming to her London home ever since she was a little girl. She remembered his anecdotes, his quotations, his admiration for great writers, his generous criticisms on small ones.

Then her poor father died, but Mr. Onslow, though he had a large family of his own to think of and provide for, had not forgotten his old friend's "dark-eyed little girl." He had seen her as she had passed through Oldcastle on her ill-omened journey to Redcote Farm. He managed the little pittance for her that the poor doctor had left behind him, and the orphan's money lost nothing in passing through his friendly hand. Thus Maud had some one

to whom she could apply about obtaining counsel for the unfortunate girl Jenny Wren; and accordingly, one bitter day in January she arrived at the Oldcastle lawyer's office, and with some difficulty (though he was a shrewd man) made him comprehend her meaning.

"Then you think the girl is innocent?" said Henley Onslow, looking curiously at the girl before him.

He knew, of course, all about the crime, Young Rendall's tragic death on New Year's Day had been talked of and written about for the last fortnight almost incessantly. He knew Mr. Inspector Pye, and respected the professional ability of that officer; but he knew the world also, and how often in it, unjust suspicion falls on the guiltless. So, looking at Maud, and thinking vaguely and curiously what could be her motive for the step she was taking, he said—

"Then you think this girl is innocent?"

"I am sure she is," answered Maud, with a strong ring of conviction in her voice.

"But," said Mr. Onslow, still thinking vaguely and curiously, "it is a Quixotic thing for you to do, young lady, to pay counsel to

defend her. The Court will, in all probability, provide her with counsel if she is undefended when the trial comes on."

"Yes," said Maud; "but I do not wish to leave it to chance—I wish to have a good barrister—to have everything done for her that can be done."

"But, my dear girl, these bigwigs charge the most ruinous fees! The old farmer at Redcote naturally will not give you money for such a purpose, and I cannot feel myself justified in spending your own."

"I wish it," reiterated Maud. "I have enough money to pay for this, Mr. Onslow, have I not?"

"Yes; certainly you have," answered the lawyer, musingly.

"Then please take it," urged Maud; and Mr. Henley Onslow began to think—was this to him a new phase in human nature that he had not yet encountered in his varied experiences, or had this young woman a stronger motive still for her generosity?

"Get some one very clever, the cleverest man you can find," continued Maud; but Mr. Onslow only smiled sagaciously, and began

drumming his fingers on the table before him. Then he sat down, and moved to Maud to take a chair opposite to him.

"I think I can tell a clever man when I hear him speak," he said presently. "There's a ring in the true metal which attracts an observant ear" (Mr. Henley Onslow had his little vanities). "And there's a young fellow—comparatively a young fellow—who was here at the Autumn Assizes, who will, I believe, make himself a name; and what is more to our purpose, won't want a huge fee to take up our case."

"What is his name?" asked Maud.

"He is called Dalton. He is a man who owes nothing to the happy accidents of good birth or fortune—but the precious ore is within." And Mr. Onslow tapped his forehead. "The man has the true nobility, Miss Maud—brains, brains, and all the wealth and rank in England cannot buy them."

"You study human nature, Mr. Onslow?" said Maud, and she cast down her eyes.

"It is a part of a lawyer's profession, my dear girl. As the doctor measures and weighs the wonderful machinery of our frames, so, in my opinion, should the man of law study and

follow the yet more intricate and wonderful machinery that we call mind."

The result of this interview, however, amounted to this. Mr. Dalton, the barrister, had to be retained to defend Jenny Wren at the approaching Assizes, and old Rendall, at Redcote Farm, heard with great anger that Mr. Henley Onslow, the well-known Oldcastle attorney, had taken up Jenny's case.

Mr. Onslow saw the girl herself in prison after this, and the shrewd man came to the conclusion that, in spite of the evidence collected against her, Jenny was innocent of the crime laid to her charge. But this was not the general opinion. In the minds of most people, Jenny was already condemned before the Court opened on the dark January morning, when she was to be tried for her life.

On the evening before the trial, Maud Eliot made the acquaintance of Mr. Dalton, the barrister. He had expressed a wish to see her, and he was introduced to her by her old friend, Mr. Henley Onslow, who had come over to Dereham to attend to the case.

Maud, her uncle, and cousin, were also in Dereham, as the trial was expected to commence

early on the following morning. Maud called by appointment on Mr. Onslow during the evening, and as she entered the room where the Oldcastle attorney was at present located, a tall, pale, fair young man rose and bowed, as well as Mr. Henley Onslow.

"Ah! my young friend, Miss Maud," said Mr. Onslow, extending his hand. "Well, this is the gentleman I spoke to you about. This is Mr. John Dalton, the barrister."

Then Mr. John Dalton bowed again, and this time he smiled. Maud saw a gentlemanly-looking man, with a grave, sweet expression, and a grave and quiet manner. Mr. John Dalton saw a girl with large, dark, eyes, and a face which struck his fancy; not a beautiful face, perhaps, but there was something in it—some charm—which he had not yet found in any other woman.

He had been, and was, a hard worker, this young man. In the school in which he had been reared he had to encounter some very unpleasant would-be masters. But the quiet, ambitious lad had fought and conquered. Poverty and contempt no longer stood in his way, but he had resolutely pushed them aside.

Perhaps it was the look of endured suffering in Maud's face which made him feel akin to her. For from the first night they met, John Dalton felt a deep and enduring interest in this dark-eyed girl.

"I have known this young lady," said Mr. Onslow smilingly, after he had introduced the two young people, "ever since she was a small child of three or four, I think. Ah! many a pleasant hour I have spent with poor Frank Eliot! Your father was a genial man, my dear girl, and a man also of taste, and talent, but—"

"Poor papa!" said Maud, as Mr. Onslow paused.

"Ah!—we were always good friends—we went into the highest company together," continued Mr. Onslow with a half-sad, little laugh. "The great dead and the great living were our familiar friends! Frank loved the poets best I remember; but my mind was harder and more practical than his—yet, in my day, I have jingled a verse or two together. Do you ever indulge in a little flirtation with the Muses, Mr. Dalton?"

The young barrister shook his head.

"I have no time," he said.

"You are right, young gentleman," said Mr.

Onslow. "The Muses, as a rule, are but deluding syrens. Yes, yes, stick to the law-courts —briefs being a surer recompense than Homeric verse!" And Mr. Onslow laughed.

Mr. Dalton answered in a few well-chosen, modest words. As he spoke, Maud was alike struck by the clearness of his voice and his ideas. Mr. Onslow had told her that graceful phrases seemed natural to Mr. Dalton; but the strength of these graceful phrases lay in the depth and culture of the young man's mind. He used no show words, but chose powerful telling words to express his thoughts.

Maud had never before talked to anyone like him. The personal beauty, and gay, though selfish, good humour of her unfortunate cousin, George Rendall, had won the girlish, passionate love of her impetuous, inexperienced heart. She had loved George Rendall without knowing why she loved him. But no woman would love John Dalton in this unreasonable way. The love he won would not be founded on the shifting sand of personal beauty. It would rest on a surer hold—a hold that time touches not—for time mars only the base alloy.

But it was of his power to win the ears of

men, and not the love of woman, that Maud was thinking as she sat listening to John Dalton's clear and ringing voice. She was thinking of the coming trial—of the terror-stricken girl lying trembling in the gaol—the gaol, whose massive walls she could see in dim outline through the semi-darkness of the evening, from the windows of her old friend's lodgings.

Mr. Dalton himself pointed out these grey, cold walls.

"I never pass a gaol," he said, "without a feeling of discomfort rising in my mind. They should not be built in our midst, I think, as this one is."

"What! not to point a moral?" said Mr. Onslow, with a smile.

"The moral does not seem very effective in this city, at least," answered Mr. Dalton, smiling also.

"Well, let us hope that your eloquent words will have freed one poor soul, at all events, from 'durance vile' by this time to-morrow," said Mr. Onslow. "We have a chance, I think, Mr. Dalton—certainly a chance."

"I hope so," answered John Dalton gravely; "for I believe the girl to be innocent."

CHAPTER VI.

JENNY'S TRIAL.

It was into a court crowded to excess in every part, that Jenny Wren entered on the grey January morning, when she was about to be tried for her life.

The mystery that surrounds death naturally gives that inscrutable foe a deep interest to the living. Thus the knowledge that the mortal existence of a handsome young woman was going to be submitted to the judgment of twelve mortal men gave undoubted piquancy to the trial about to begin. Had Jenny been supposed to be a thief, the Dereham Court-house would not have been so full. But Jenny was supposed to have murdered a man, and had thus put her comely neck in jeopardy; so every eye was fixed on her when, half-blind with terror, she was led forth from her prison cell.

Mortal fear is said to have turned dark locks to snow in a single night. Mortal fear had not turned Jenny's brown hair white, but it had told terribly upon the appearance of the girl. Her rosy colour was faded, her lips were blanched and drawn; and when her frightened eyes first glanced round the crowded court, a thrill of pity for her ran through the breasts of the soft-hearted spectators who were present, even in spite of the heinousness of her supposed crime.

Mr. Wingfield, the barrister who conducted the prosecution, opened the case in a very temperate speech. Perhaps the good looks of the girl were not without influence on the jovial smiling man, whose duty, nevertheless, on the present occasion was to get her hanged if he could.

He briefly detailed the circumstances that we already know, and which were indeed known to almost every person present in the court.

Then a plan of the house and stables at Redcote was produced, and then the old farmer gave his evidence.

"The last time he saw his son alive," he said, "was about three o'clock in the afternoon

of New Year's Day. George was then talking to his cousin, Maud Eliot, in the kitchen. He was telling her he was going to Fothergal's farm in the evening. He mentioned the name of the girl, Jenny Wren, and said that she had refused to clean his boots. He then went out of the kitchen, and witness never saw him again. About half-past eight o'clock, he (the witness) told the girl, Jenny Wren, to go and lock in the stable and the byre doors. When she came back she was 'mad-like,' and fell down in a fit in the passage. Witness gave her some whiskey, and then she came round, and asked witness 'to go and look at Mr. George.' Witness thought she had had a fright and that her wits were wandering, and took no notice. Her hands and dress had blood on them. Witness went to bed, and in the morning his niece, Maud Eliot, and Jenny Wren came to him and told him George had not come home. Witness then detailed how he found George's dead body in the loft.

He was cross-examined by Mr. Dalton.

"Yes, Jenny Wren had said George was lying dead in the loft over the stable when she first came out of the fit. Witness thought she

was mad; thought she had had a fall, and that it had sent her out of her mind. Witness had seen Jenny during the afternoon. She had put out the tea. Witness thought she had a queer look, and that she had been quarrelling with George about going to Fothergal's. George was laughing and chaffing about her not cleaning his boots. Jenny fell down in a fit again when they found George's dead body in the loft. Witness told her that she had murdered him because she was jealous of him."

"But the girl, Jenny Wren, emphatically denied this?" asked Mr. Dalton.

"Ay," said old Rendall, "she said she had found him dead, but I told her it was her hand had done it."

"But she still denied it?"

"Ay, she said she had told the truth, and knew naught more."

Then Maud Eliot was called. Her appearance excited great interest in the court. The extreme paleness of her complexion, her black dress, and the look of suppressed pain and suffering on her face, created a feeling of sympathy, and her evidence was decidedly favourable to Jenny.

She said her cousin was laughing about Jenny having refused to clean his boots, when he spoke of it in the kitchen, and evidently regarded it as a mere joke between them. Jenny had been in and out of the kitchen all the time that witness had been there during the afternoon. But Jenny had duties outside the house. She had the cows to milk, and the pigs to feed, and the water-tap at which all the dishes and pans used at dinner were washed, was also outside in the yard. Witness left the kitchen shortly after she saw her cousin there, and went to her own room where she usually sat. She was there until roused by Jenny's cries about nine in the evening. Then she went downstairs and found Jenny lying in the passage in a convulsive fit. Witness thought Jenny had had a fright or fall. The moment Jenny came round, she said that she had seen George lying dead in the loft. Then the whiskey which her uncle had given Jenny seemed to overpower her, and she fell into a heavy sleep. When witness roused her in the morning, she again told witness she believed she had seen George lying dead. Then witness and Jenny roused her uncle, and they found

George. Her uncle accused Jenny of murdering him, but this Jenny most emphatically denied. She (Jenny) said she had gone up to the loft to look at George's things, and seen him dead. She said she had taken hold of him, and thus her hands and dress were stained. She said, "This is the truth, master—I know naught more."

Maud was cross-examined both by Mr. Wingfield and Mr. Dalton. But her evidence remained unshaken. She always sat in her own room, she said, in which she had a fire, because she was unused to the more homely ways of the farm-house, as she had been brought up in London. She rarely took tea with her uncle, as he liked it in the kitchen. Thus she had seen nothing of the inhabitants of the farm after she had spoken to her cousin in the kitchen, but she had heard Jenny moving about in the rooms upstairs during the afternoon. Witness's room window looked out on the garden in front of the house, and not on the farmyard at the back ; so she had not seen Jenny busy with her usual duties outside. She had heard her voice once or twice, talking to her uncle. George never came back to the

house after he went out of the kitchen door about three o'clock. She would have heard his step if he had done so. It was a star-light night when she heard Jenny's cries in the passage about nine o'clock. The stars were very bright.

Maud's voice faltered and broke more than once when she was giving her evidence. When she spoke of the stains on Jenny's hands and dress, a visible shudder ran through her frame. But her evidence on the whole was favourable to Jenny. During her cross-examination by Mr. Dalton, she said that Jenny started to her feet when accused by her uncle of murdering his son, and most emphatically and indignantly denied that she had done so.

But it is useless to follow here all the details of a long trial. The doctor's evidence as to the ghastly nature of the wound on the head, which had crushed out the life of young George Rendall, and the smiling statement of Mr. Inspector Pye, need not be given in full, though Inspector Pye's words made anything but a favourable impression as regarded Jenny.

This benign-looking officer stated that Jenny was thrown into a terrible flutter by his ap-

pearance at the farm. That she said she hated the sight of a policeman. That she suggested, before being questioned, that a tramp had committed the murder; that she had washed the apron that she had worn when she had stated she had first found George Rendall's body; that the sleeves of her dress had also been partially washed. The water-tap where Jenny usually washed her dishes and pans was close to the stable-door, and the inference of this was that Jenny must have seen George go away from the homestead during the afternoon, if he had done so, as Jenny stated that she supposed that he had. Jenny had stated at the coroner's inquest that she had seen George in the stable, and that she had said he was going to Fothergal's, and then she had stated she was not certain that she did see him in the stable. In fact she had contradicted herself, and had admitted to the coroner that her reason for going to look over George's things was "because folks talked about him keeping company with Mary Fothergal."

Then Mr. Inspector Pye produced the verses all stained with George's blood, on which the unfortunate young man's head had fallen after

he had received his death-blow. These verses were addressed "To Mary," and were of an amatory nature, but the hand that penned them had grown cold before the lines were ended.

Mr. Wingfield summed up his case for the prosecution after Mr. Inspector Pye's statement was ended.

It looked very black for Jenny, as Mr. Wingfield went on. "George Rendall had left the kitchen strong and well, and had gone into the stable, and had never again been seen alive. The girl, Jenny Wren, had been continually —both by her own account, and by the very nature of her duties—close to the stable door the whole afternoon. Yet before the coroner she had said she was not sure whether she had spoken to George or not; and then again she admitted that she had done so. George Rendall it was admitted, went into the stable, and the whole afternoon, when this murder must have been committed, the girl, Jenny Wren, was about the place, and close to the stable door. There was no one else but the family on the homestead. The house dog never barked, nor gave any sign of the presence of a stranger, yet Jenny Wren stated to Inspector Pye that she

believed the murder to have been committed by a tramp. But this tramp was plainly imaginary. These two young people, George Rendall and Jenny Wren, were virtually alone together, for the old man was dozing over the kitchen fire, and they have heard from Miss Eliot's evidence that she never left her room upstairs. These two young people were thus alone together probably the whole afternoon, and about nine o'clock (having been sent by her old master to lock in for the night) Jenny rushed into the house, and either did, or pretended to, fall down in a fit. Then she announced, amid hysterical cries, that she had found George Rendall dead. Her master and her young mistress believed she had got a scare or fright, and the old man gave her so much whiskey that she fell asleep. Her hands and dress were stained. And," continued Mr. Wingfield, emphatically, " I leave you, gentlemen of the jury, to draw your own conclusions from these facts. You may ask the motive for this cruel crime ? Alas ! it is not far to seek ! This unfortunate young man had trifled with the affections of the unfortunate young woman before you, and had forsaken her for another. He was writing out some verses

to his Mary—to his new love—when the blow which destroyed him must have been struck from behind. One of the most powerful, the most maddening emotions of the human heart was plainly the motive. Jealousy—that fierce demon—had possession of the heart, which (probably without premeditation) conceived this crime, and jealousy, no doubt, nerved the hand which struck the fatal blow."

Mr. Wingfield then went on to point out the various discrepancies in Jenny's statements; her extraordinary excitement and flutter on the arrival of the policemen at the farm; the washing of her apron and sleeves; and before he closed his case, Jenny was as good as condemned by nearly everyone present in the court.

Presently, however, Mr. Dalton rose and addressed the jury for the defence.

"This was a case," he said, "in which there was only circumstantial evidence against the prisoner. The young man, George Rendall, had come to a violent death. He had gone into the stable alive and well, and the counsel for the prosecution had endeavoured to prove that no other hand than the prisoner's could

have struck him down. But how was this? Miss Eliot in her evidence tells us that she heard the girl, Jenny Wren, engaged in her household duties in the bedrooms upstairs during the afternoon. What was there, then, to prevent another hand than this woman's dealing the fatal blow, when this girl was busy in the house? The counsel for the prosecution has also given us a motive for this crime. He has told us that jealousy was the motive. I concur with him in this idea. But I do not believe it was the jealousy of a weak and too confiding woman. No; the unfortunate young man whose head fell down on his unfinished love verses, had probably, by his reckless disregard of the feelings of others, made more dangerous enemies than a disappointed and angry girl. We are told of other loves—of his last love. Had these other loves no lovers that perhaps fiercely resented the interference, the success, of this handsome wooer? The prisoner, it is stated, contradicted herself before the coroner; she was flurried by the sight of a policeman. No wonder! For when the old man's eyes first fell on his dead son, what did he say? He openly accused the girl, Jenny Wren, of

murder. Miss Eliot has told us, and the old farmer has told us, how the prisoner started to her feet and emphatically denied it. But the accusation would naturally haunt the mind of an ignorant and frightened girl. She had found George Rendall; she had lifted him up; her hands and dress were stained with blood! What, then, could be more natural than her conduct after the awful knowledge had come to her that her faithless lover was dead! She rushed into the house, she fell down convulsed with her dreadful news. Then, when she had found her voice, she told what she had seen. Did this look like guilt? If guilty, she would not have been the first to tell her ghastly secret. Then, again, in the morning, when the effect of the powerful spirit which the old man had given her had passed away, she once more repeated the same story. 'George was dead,' she said. Yet, because no one else was seen on the homestead; because this excited, frightened girl had washed her apron and her sleeves; because she was fluttered by the sight of a policeman, she was accused and arrested on the charge of murder!

"We are told," continued Mr. Dalton, "that

on the night when the accused woman first discovered and announced this dreadful crime, that the heavens were lit and luminous with stars. If those silent watchers could find tongues, I believe, most solemnly on my soul I believe, that they would tell us that the hand of the hapless girl now standing before you, was not the hand that struck down this unfortunate and erring man! But they are mute—no voice from heaven directs us to the truth; but it seems to me that reason, heaven's best gift to man, does direct us. It points out to my mind the absolute impossibility that by one blow a woman could kill a strong and powerful young man. It points out the likelihood that a vengeful and angry rival was the real slayer of this faithless lover of many women. It points out the unlikelihood that a murderess would rush in and cry out aloud, if her hands and dress were red with the blood of her victim! Jenny Wren would have washed away these ghastly tokens before, and not after, she proclaimed the deed, if she had been guilty.

"I will only add a few more words. The prisoner at the bar is a young woman—life is

sweet to her—the untimely grave to which your verdict may consign her is naturally dreadful to her mind. On supposition alone will you send a frightened, terrified, unfit soul to face what I believe to be an unjust doom? I cannot believe it! This crime was wrought in secret, and a shrouded secret it remains. Some day the light may shine upon it, but believe me no true ray has yet fallen to point out the real murderer of George Rendall."

Mr. Dalton's clear and ringing voice, his emphatic and earnest utterance, full of evident belief in his own words, made a powerful impression in favour of the trembling prisoner; and when, at the conclusion of his address, Jenny burst into loud and passionate sobs, and lifted her hands as if to appeal to heaven to proclaim the truth, many women present were moved to tears.

CHAPTER VII.

THE EFFECT OF THE VERDICT.

To wait—to alternate between hope and fear—to listen while arguments are calmly and dispassionately placed for and against an issue which to you means life and death, must surely be one of the most terrible trials to which the human mind can be subjected.

Two women who sat in the court at Dereham, on the grey January day on which Jenny Wren was tried, went through this torture during the summing-up of the case by the judge.

The woman at the bar, whose "dimly-lighted soul" was overwhelmed with one overpowering fear—the dread of death—was absolutely gasping with terror; trying to follow the judge's words; swayed first to hope and then crushed back; until even the cold, stern man who sat

in judgment did not care to look in that terror-stricken face.

The other woman, whose face only one man noticed, wore a different expression. Intense anxiety was written there, and a certain determinate resolve. She, too, followed the judge's words, followed the calm, even, momentous tones; and as he went on, weighing this piece of evidence and that, she began to perceive that the judge was summing up in favour of the prisoner.

Then the jury retired to consider their verdict, and the terrible suspense in two human hearts grew, if it were possible, more intense.

Maud Eliot felt her mind beginning to wander under the strain, and grotesque mazes and misplaced ideas came floating between her and the dread reality of the present scene.

Jenny Wren was prostrate — a shivering, crouching creature, dumb with terror and despair. Then in about an hour the jury returned.

The foreman, in answer to the challenge of the Clerk of the Crown, said:

"We find the prisoner not guilty."

And as the words passed his lips, Maud Eliot

fell forward as if struck by a sudden blow.

Jenny gave a loud shriek, and then burst into passionate and inarticulate cries of joy. But while most of the people in the court were watching the about-to-be-freed prisoner, John Dalton, the barrister, was pushing his way through the crowd, until he came to the spot where Maud Eliot was lying, to all appearances dead, supported by some pitying bystanders.

"This young lady is known to me, is my friend," he said, and he at once took her in his arms. "Will one of you kindly help me to carry her out?"

A man near immediately offered to comply with his request, and as quietly as possible, Maud was carried through the crowd to a small private room adjoining the court-room.

"Send for a doctor," said John Dalton, as he laid Maud's insensible form on a couch, and kneeling down beside her, began to chafe her stiff, cold hands.

When the doctor arrived, he pronounced Maud to be seriously ill; so ill, that any idea of her returning on the same evening to Redcote Farm was forced to be abandoned. The old farmer, who was bitterly disappointed about

Jenny's escape, grumbled and swore at his unconscious niece on being summoned to her side.

But there was no help for it. Maud lay as one dead for some time, and when she revived began rambling and talking in such disjointed fashion that the doctor significantly looked at John Dalton (who still lingered near Maud's side) and touched his forehead.

"It will end in brain fever," he said, and before the night was over his words were fully verified.

In the meanwhile, kindly Mrs. Stivers had also sought out Maud, and had arranged for her to be conveyed to lodgings in the town, and finally had persuaded her parson to allow her, for one night at least, to remain with the unfortunate girl.

The Rev. Gordon was moved to acquiese to his Mary's wishes on this point by a judicious invitation from John Dalton.

"Just this one night, Gordon," urged Mary in her gentle way. "Could you not dine in town, dear, and remain all night, and we can drive home together to-morrow morning?"

"I shall be happy if Mr. Stivers will dine with me at the County Hotel?" said John

Dalton, courteously, who could not help overhearing what had passed between the Vicar and his wife.

The Vicar looked gratified at John Dalton's proposal.

"I thank you, Mr. Dalton," he said graciously; "your invitation is agreeable to me, for I have a great respect and liking for you learned gentlemen of the law. In fact, at one time I thought of donning the wig and gown; but circumstances, those iron despots (here Mr. Stivers adopted his pulpit style), swayed me against my will, and landed me on the quiet shores of a country vicarage."

"A very pleasant landing-place," said John Dalton.

Mr. Stivers shrugged his substantial shoulders. But the end of this conversation was that he went to dine with John Dalton, and permitted his Mary to sit up with Maud Eliot during the night. And as the long hours wore, on the unhappy girl's mental condition became painfully evident. She sat up in bed; she talked in a loud, excited voice; she pressed her hand on her burning brow, and looked eagerly round with her wandering eyes.

"The stars!" she cried presently. "The stars—the silent watchers—they saw, they saw! But they are mute," she continued, raising her voice to a wild, unnatural tone, and quoting the words of John Dalton's speech in the court during the day. "No voice from heaven directs us!" And then she burst into a laugh which was very terrible to listen to.

And all through the night it was the same thing; and when the doctor arrived in the morning he pronounced Maud to be dangerously ill.

But while, very sadly and gravely, Mrs. Stivers was making preparations to leave her, for she dare not even ask her lord and master for permission to remain away from her domestic duties for another day, to her great surprise the Rev. Gordon arrived at the lodging where Maud was, with his face absolutely radiant.

"Ah, little love!" he said, addressing his Mary, "I have hurried at once to tell you my news. A letter has just been brought to me from Norsely, to tell me that my Aunt Gordon —you have often heard me speak of her, you know, the rich old lady at Croydon—is dying,

and this letter is to summon me to her death-bed. I know what this means—five thousand at least—for I am the old lady's godson, and I must start at once."

"How long will you be away, Gordon?" asked Mary, gravely.

"I won't leave the old lady until her last breath is drawn; upon that I'm determined," answered the Rev. Gordon, decisively. "I know what the greedy hangers-on are who get about death-beds; and, therefore, it is plainly my duty to stay by the old lady's side. Prosser will take next Sunday for me, and you must see about someone else to officiate if I stay any longer. In the meanwhile, you can remain here."

"Very well," said Mary. "I think I can be of some use—"

"Use!" interrupted the parson, "I should think so. Why, you will save that old screw, Rendall, all the expenses of a nurse for his niece. But I must not waste my time in talking. Good-bye, little wife! Of course old Rendall must defray all expenses for his niece, and you, as long as you stay with her—he can afford it." And the Rev. Gordon smiled,

kissed the tip of his wife's little nose, and was gone.

His wife did not feel by any means broken-hearted at his departure. The selfish wear out the love of others, and rarely is it that those who think most of self hold the first place in any other human heart.

So when John Dalton called during the morning to inquire after Maud, he found Mrs. Stivers in her usual calm frame of mind. She told him that Mr. Stivers was gone, and that she had arranged for the present to stay on where she was and nurse Miss Eliot. The young barrister was only too pleased to hear this, and during the week, as he was detained in Dereham by his professional engagements, he constantly found time to call on Mrs. Stivers and make more anxious inquiries than he cared to admit even to himself about the conditon of Maud.

He saw her once or twice before he left Dereham. The severe paroxysms of her illness were by this time over, and John Dalton felt strangely touched as he looked at the melancholy, dark eyes, in which there was again the light of reason but not the light of hope.

He spoke to her kindly and gently, and told her how he hoped soon to be in Dereham again.

"But perhaps you will have returned to your uncle's house at Redcote, before then?" he asked.

Maud's pale, wasted face suddenly flushed at this question.

"I will never return to Redcote," she answered quickly, "*never*."

She said this last word with emphatic emphasis, and Mary Stivers, who was standing by, looked at John Dalton in sympathetic silence.

"She cannot get over her cousin's sad death," whispered Mary to the young barrister, as she bade him good-bye outside Maud's room. "Poor girl—you see she cannot even bear the name of Redcote."

"She can never return there under any circumstances," said John Dalton gravely; and Mary could not help wondering, as she looked after him, at the cause of the deep interest with which this young man evidently regarded Maud.

And this interest did not die away after John

Dalton left Dereham. He wrote to Mary Stivers to enquire after Maud, and a fortnight later, to the surprise of that lady, one day unexpectedly returned to Dereham, making a somewhat lame apology for his reappearance.

Maud by this time was able to be in the sitting-room downstairs, and old Rendall was urging her to return to Redcote. But Maud would not hear of this. She was corresponding with her old friend, Mr. Henley Onslow, regarding the position of her affairs, and she had told Mary Stivers that she meant to go back to London.

And now she told this to John Dalton, and the two sat and talked gravely about the coming change. Then, one day, to John Dalton's surprise and consternation, when as usual he called to see Maud, he was told she was worse.

"It is that girl Jenny Wren—the girl you defended," said Mrs. Stivers to John Dalton, with some anger in her voice; "she called to-day when I was out, and insisted upon seeing Maud, and Maud has been very ill since."

"Why did she come here?" asked Dalton.

Mary could not tell him. Maud was too ill, and too much agitated to be questioned, she said, and the doctor had ordered that she was to be kept perfectly quiet. Jenny Wren, also, when asked by Mary, had denied saying anything to Maud so utterly to upset her.

"I made bold to call to see Miss Maud, ma'am," she told Mary, wriggling and twisting about her comely form, "to ask her a bit favour for Jack Foster, poor fellow."

"Jack Foster, the poacher?" asked Mary.

"Well, ma'am, some folks call him such; but he's got into trouble anyhow, again, through that old villain, Pye, the inspector; and I made bold to call on Miss Maud to ask her to speak to that gentleman, Mr. Dalton, who spoke up for me at the 'ssizes, to see if he'd speak up for Jack, poor fellow; and Jack thought if he sent Miss Maud a line, she would do this for him—and I just guv her Jack's line, and then, all of a suddent, she seemed to take most awful ill—and I'm sure Jack meant no harm, poor fellow! though he may have snared a hare or two—but what's that?"

This was all the explanation of Maud's sudden illness, that Jenny Wren apparently truthfully

could give. But while Mary and Dalton were anxiously discussing the probable cause of her attack downstairs, let us for a moment enter the bedroom of the unhappy girl upstairs, and see why the sight of Jenny Wren's handsome face had once more almost upset her reason.

Up and down the room Maud kept restlessly wandering, with pale face, and a look of fear, almost horror, in her large dark eyes. In her clenched hand she grasped a few soiled and crumpled lines—lines written in Dereham gaol —the lines that Jenny Wren had given her from Jack Foster, the poacher. They were as follows :—

Miss ——,—One who held his tongue out of goodwill to you is in trouble now, and asks you to speak a word for him. I won't name day or date—you'll mind what I mean—and the bearer will tell you what I want, and I remain respectfully what I always was—

A Silent Watcher.

CHAPTER VIII.

"EAT, DRINK, AND BE MERRY."

THE very day after Jenny Wren's strange visit to Maud, Mary Stivers received a letter from her husband, to tell her that his hours of anxiety and watching by his dying relative's bedside were over.

I own, my love (he wrote to Mary), that I feel my heart uplifted within me. Mr. Fielden, poor Mrs. Gordon's solicitor, called upon me last night, just an hour before the old lady's demise, and he gave me a pretty broad hint as to the contents of the will. In this will I am left the good round sum of ten thousand pounds. I hoped for five thousand—I expected five—but to get double that sum is a stroke of good fortune I did not reckon on. I mean to take things much easier in future. If I keep the living I shall get a resident curate to take entire charge during the winter and the bad weather in spring. No good fagging one's self to death now. In fact, I mean to enjoy myself, and I shall endeavour to spend the rest of my life as pleasantly as possible.

How is Miss Eliot? I shall, of course, remain here until after the funeral, and until all arrangements about the money are completed; but if Miss Eliot is not better by that time, old Rendall must get a nurse for his niece, and do as best he can, for I shall want you, my love, at home. And now, good-bye! Take care of yourself, and be looking your best when I return.—Your affectionate husband,

GORDON STIVERS.

Mary read this letter through, and then put her hand over her face, and gave a weary, heavy sigh. She knew money was a good thing, for she had felt the bitter want of it, and if she had possessed any of her own, she would never have married the Rev. Gordon Stivers. But she could not rejoice over its possession when the dead hand from whence it came was scarcely cold. The idea revolted her. A perhaps reluctant soul had just been torn from its earthly tenement, and behold, the heir was making merry by the open grave! Mary had never loved her husband less, had never felt the task of her life more hard, than when she was forced to sit down to write to her lord and master, and congratulate him on his good fortune.

The world (their little world) also congratulated the Vicar of Norsely and his wife; and

even John Dalton smiled and complimented Mary on her husband's good luck. Only Maud said nothing, and her strange, excited, restless manner continued to alarm both Mary and John Dalton.

But in a few days Mary had very little time even to think of Maud. The Rev. Gordon returned to Dereham, after ordering Mary to engage rooms for him at the County Hotel; and Mary, as in duty bound, went to the station to meet her husband, though her heart felt by no means elated at the prospect of his return.

The Rev. Gordon was, however, quite satisfied with the greeting that he received from his Mary. He was not indeed thinking of his Mary. He was thinking of a splendid salmon he had brought down from town, and wondering whether the journey had injured its delicate flavour. He shook his Mary's hand, and then rushed along the platform to look after his salmon. He gazed with delight as it lay shining amid its delicate green packing, but he scarcely looked at his wife's face, or thought of the weary hours of watching that she had spent by Maud's bedside during his absence.

And his Mary saw all this. But she took

his arm quite meekly and walked down from the station with him, and smiled while he bragged and boasted of his new wealth. He looked flushed and somewhat bloated, and evidently he had not fasted, if he had prayed, by his dead relative.

He stayed at the hotel during the next few days, and did not seem in any hurry to leave Dereham. He was enjoying himself in fact, and his heart was merry within him. He was very cordial in his manner to John Dalton, and insisted upon him dining with him at the hotel. But he was almost unendurable to Dalton. The smooth, outward manner of the young barrister grew ruffled in the presence of the Vicar of Norseley, so strong was the antipathy with which he inspired him.

But suddenly—in a moment—when the Rev. Gordon's heart was full of pride and mirth, a serious illness attacked him. He had lingered too late one cold evening by the side of the river, thinking of and planning out his future life, and a treacherous white mist had crept up from the water, and had stolen with its poisonous breath down the throat of the elated parson.

He awoke in the night choking; awoke, and grew terrified, pale and alarmed. His dead relation, Mrs. Gordon, from whom he had inherited his new wealth, had died of bronchitis, and the Rev. Gordon had stood by and watched complacently her painful, gasping breaths. He remembered them now; remembered them, and terror struck chill and cold into his heart.

Mary was roused before the dawn by a message from the hotel, and instantly rose and dressed, and went out in the dark hours of the early morning to attend upon her husband. She found him walking up and down the floor of the room, apparently unable to breathe, and with fear stamped on every lineament of his face.

"That fool, Dr. Bagshot, has not come yet," he gasped, "though it's half-an-hour at least since he was sent for. Go yourself, Mary, and insist upon him coming at once—I can't breathe—something dreadful is the matter with my throat."

Mary tried some simple remedy, and then hurried out to go to the doctor's house to seek him. But she met him coming down the dark,

quiet street, on his way to the hotel, and together they went up to the bedroom of the terrified man.

The doctor was quiet, consoling, and apparently not alarmed by the Rev. Gordon's condition.

"You have caught a bad cold," he said, and he ordered and saw applied a severe blister, and took other very prompt measures with his patient. He stayed also some time, and seemed anxious about the effect of his remedies, and when he left he told the Rev. Gordon that he would look in again to see him, and then he gave Mary a little hint to follow him from the room.

Mary did so, and when they were outside Dr. Bagshot's face assumed a different expression.

"Keep up his spirits," he whispered, "he is very nervous—but, my dear Mrs. Stivers, I must not deceive you—it is a bad attack of acute bronchitis, and there is no doubt that the vicar is dangerously ill."

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And the sudden end of this dangerous illness came in a few brief days. Inflammation of the lungs set in, and Dr. Bagshot asked leave to

call in another doctor, and when the other doctor came, he took even a worse view of the case than Dr. Bagshot had done.

It had come, in fact, to this, that the two doctors, after various consultations, came to the conclusion that it was the duty of someone to tell the Rev. Gordon Stivers that if he had any monetary arrangements to settle, that he had better make haste to do so.

But the terrified man would not realise this; he dare not realise it. All his life he had acted and sighed and prayed by death-beds, and spoken of our "dear departing brother" with perfect equanimity, but had never remembered that the day would come when his soul also would be required of him, and when all his shams would no longer avail him.

He insisted to the very end that he felt better, and appealed to Mary to say he was better; though, alas! as the words passed his lips, his pulses were sinking lower and lower, his eyes glazing, and his heart beating fainter and fainter beneath the hand of death.

But let us close the door and go away. Leave the praying, weeping woman — the dying, wretched, miserable man. They were

alone together for some time—alone when the Rev. Gordon's tongue could no longer dispute his Maker's will; alone when the clock struck the hour at which he died, and when, just at the last, Mary began to hope that her prayers and tears were not unanswered, and that some peace came in the end to the departing soul.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LITTLE HOUSE AT CHELSEA.

Thus Mary became a widow, and after a while —after the first shock and grief was over—she asked Maud Eliot to live with her in London. She scarcely knew that John Dalton had influenced her to make this offer, and yet he, in truth, had done so. His interest in Maud was very great, and he was convinced that the further she was parted from the scene of the dark tragedy at Redcote would be the better for her, and that change would be her best chance of restoration to health and happiness.

So Mary asked her to go with her, and after a while the old farmer at Redcote grumblingly gave his consent. Nay, after shuffling and twisting his poor, lean, rheumatic hand for some time in the pocket of his drab knee-breeches, he at last produced a greasy purse.

"I've had great losses lately, my lass," he said, "bad times, and Robert's but a poor hand at a bargain, and cash is very scarce—but ye'll want a trifle to pay thy train-fare, I warrant—and so if five pounds will do—"

"Thank you, uncle," said Maud, more softly than she had ever before spoken to the old man, "but I have enough. Mrs. Stivers won't allow me to pay anything to her for board at present, and Mr. Henley Onslow was over here the other day, and the trifle my poor father left has done so well in something that he put it into, that I am quite rich at present."

"Eh, that's well now, lass," answered the old farmer, hastily slipping back his purse, and buttoning up his breeches pocket. "Very well—and did he tell ye," he added cautiously, "what he had invested thy bit o' money in?"

"No, uncle," said Maud.

"Get that out of him, lassie, then," urged the old man. "I've a bit money mysel', that if I knew of any real good thing I wouldn't mind laying it out—these lawyer chaps know what they're after. I've a bit money, not much, but I'd like to make it more."

"Well, I'll ask, uncle."

"Aye do, and drop your cousin or me a line; and lass, you're welcome to come back when you like to Redcote—the change to London will set thee up again after the bad bout ye've had, and all the trouble about poor George. That vile jade, Jenny Wren, who ought to have been hangit by this time, is barmaid, I am told, at a public in the town. Well, the devil will get his own yet. If I come across her, I'll tell her my mind. It was yon young lawyer's jaw, and nought else, that got her off."

"I'll write, uncle," said Maud, interrupting his tirade.

"Aye do, lass, and come back when ye like." And in the full belief that she was only going for a visit, and meant to return to Redcote, the old man went away.

But Maud never meant to return. She went to the house door with her uncle, and she knew that in this world she would see his face no more.

She had told her old friend, Mr. Henley Onslow, of her resolution to leave her uncle, and the sagacious lawyer thought that she was right.

"You are unsuited for the life," he said,

looking at her. "Ah, my dear girl, you must forget all the past. I am not a prophet, but I can see a little ahead, sometimes, and I have seen lately—you must forgive an old friend—that a young friend of mine admires you greatly; is sincerely interested in you, in fact; and Dalton is a rising man, my dear Miss Maud—my old chum's daughter may be the wife of the Lord Chancellor yet." And Mr. Henley Onslow laughed heartily.

Maud's pale face coloured, and she cast down her eyes.

"You must not say this, Mr. Onslow, even in jest," she said, a moment later. "Mr. Dalton has been very kind to me—more than kind—but it is merely because he knows I am so friendless, so—so—unfortunate." And Maud's voice trembled as she pronounced the last word.

"Well, we shall see," answered Mr. Onslow, still smiling; and then he changed the conversation, and highly approved of Maud's present intention of living with Mrs. Stivers.

And Maud herself was only too glad to go. Mary had been in very constant correspondence lately with Dalton, who was now in London, concerning a house which the barrister thought

would suit the young widow and her friend. It belonged to an artist friend of Dalton's, who had lately lost his wife, and wished to go to Italy for a year. He (the artist) did not want to make money of his house, but he wanted someone whom he could trust to live in it, and take care of his art treasures while he was away. He had mentioned this to Dalton, and Dalton had at once thought of the young widow at Dereham.

He had accordingly written to Mary about it, and Mary thought it would suit her. It was at Chelsea—a pretty spot, with a garden in front, and a little garden and greenhouse at the back—and the rent would be, Dalton told Mary, absolutely nominal to a suitable tenant.

Thus, when the train in which Mary and Maud travelled up to town reached King's Cross terminus, Mary rose eagerly, and bent out of the carriage window, and the next moment Maud heard Mary addressing someone, and looking hastily up she saw by the lights in the station the pale, grave face of John Dalton.

"Here is Mr. Dalton, Maud," said Mary, with a glad ring in her voice, and the next minute the young barrister was shaking hands with them.

"Thank you for coming to meet us," said Mary, as she stepped out of the carriage.

"Thank you for telling me the train you meant to travel by," answered John Dalton smiling, and Mary blushed softly as he said the words.

"I did not tell Maud I had told you," she said, "for I thought most likely you would be too busy to come—or perhaps might be out of town—but when I was answering your kind letter, I thought I would just mention that we meant to travel to-day."

Dalton agreed to call for them the next day at eleven o'clock, so that they might go over the little house at Chelsea together, and then Mary and Maud drove to a quiet family hotel in Manchester Street, where they meant to stay until they found a house.

As good luck would have it, the next morning was one of those bright spring ones, when everything seems so beautiful after the gloom of winter. The sun was shining on the river, on the trim flower-beds which only last spring the artist's young wife had tended so carefully. It was shining into the gracefully-draped windows of the house and on the artistic furniture within.

Mary was quite charmed with the place, and the widowed artist was quite charmed with the handsome young widow who proposed to become his tenant.

He showed Mary his pictures, his china, his choicest treasures. Rare bits of lace, hideous bits (to Mary's uneducated eyes) of dull-tinted fabrics, which he prized above gold or silver. And while Mary was gazing and listening, Dalton and Maud had wandered into the sun-lit garden.

They were not talking of the past. Maud said nothing to Dalton of her visitor on the day when she had again taken so suddenly ill; nothing of the strangely-written request that visitor had brought, nor of its weird signature, though she was thinking of these things as she stood talking there with him—though they lay like a black shadow between her and the sun!

She meant to forget, forget, she had told herself. She would never see Dereham more; never the old grey farm-house at Redcote; never the faces of those who lived and died there.

But she saw one dead face still in her dreams The comely face that had lain crushed on the

unfinished love verses, the laughing, handsome eyes, the careless smile of her cousin George. She had seen that face last night, even with the hum and stir of the great city around her. She saw it now in the sun-lit garden, with the grave, sweet eyes of John Dalton bent upon her. But she would forget—forget, she told herself again. She shut her eyes—the past was a shadow—it was done, it was gone, she would remember it no more. Then she looked in John Dalton's face and smiled, and talked of the shining river and the flowers ; but John Dalton knew, as he answered her, that the black, dark shadow still lay upon her heart.

. . . . . .

"We are forgetting our young friends," at last said Mary to the artist.

"They look perfectly happy," answered the artist, glancing out of one of the windows at the pair below. "Ah, Mrs. Stivers, theirs is the one happy time of life—the dawn, the bud—happy because hope and expectation clothe the future with a beauty which in reality is so seldom fulfilled." And somehow the artist's words jarred slightly on Mary's ears.

But the end of this interview was, that Mary took the artist's pretty little house at Chelsea for a year.

"You can come in when you like," said the artist; "come to-morrow.

Mary did not exactly accept this offer, but before the end of a week she and Maud were sitting on the art furniture, and gazing respectfully at the art treasures through the glass of the cabinets, in which, in spite of his admiration for Mary, the artist had carefully and wisely locked them away.

CHAPTER X.

MAUD'S ANSWER.

JOHN DALTON came often, and sat on the art furniture too. He sat by the side of Mary, and he sat by the side of Maud. These two women knew no one at first in London, at least Mary literally knew no one, and the friends that Maud once had known lived mostly at the other end of London, and had probably utterly forgotten the existence of the late Dr. Frank Eliot's daughter.

Mary, however, was a busy little woman, and easily found plenty to do. Perhaps it was the art furniture inspired her, but she took to drawing, went to a school of design, made friends with the clergyman of the parish and his wife, and had her little charitable missions, her gentle words of comfort and help for many a poor sick and suffering soul, before she had been two months in London.

Maud sometimes went with her when she visited among the poor, and sometimes she would not go. Maud had also taken to an occupation. The restless, passionate, impetuous heart was striving to satisfy its cravings by imagining the passions and struggles of others. She would be a writer, she thought; she would grow rich, she would pay dear, kind Mary all she owed her, and then she would go further away still—away from England—to some wild country, perhaps, where there would be nothing to remind her of the shadowed past.

So all through the bright summer days Maud sat writing, or thinking of what she would write; going very little out, watching the river, trying to put on paper her vague dreams, her crude and unfinished sketches of the drama of life, in which she had already played so sad a part.

But one day, when John Dalton found her alone, he smilingly asked her to put away her work.

"And don't begin another book, Maud," he said presently.

"I suppose you think it is no use?" answered Maud, sadly enough.

"I didn't say that—but I want you to begin to think of something else."

"Of something else?" repeated Maud.

"Yes; of woman's best mission after all," said Dalton, bending down his head, and with almost a tender smile. "I want you to begin to think of marrying, Maud — to think of marrying *me*."

Maud gave a slight start, and a burning colour in a moment dyed her usually pale face.

"It is impossible," she said the next instant; "quite impossible."

"But why so?" said Dalton. "Think of what I said a few minutes ago, Maud—let the past lie buried."

The girl did not speak. She, too, was thinking. "He is generous, he is noble," she thought. "If I had not been what I am, I could have been a happy woman as John Dalton's wife."

"You will think it over," said Dalton presently. "Hush! I do not want a positive answer to-night. I will ask for one some other day."

But as weeks went on, John Dalton became impatient. This unsettled state of mind did

not suit the young man's arduous work. He had learned to love Maud, but he had another mistress (as Mr. Henley Onslow had told her) to whom he had hitherto devoted all his days, and this was the *law*.

He was ambitious, and he knew that to rise he must work. Amusement and pleasure he had put aside, and love, until he met the dark-eyed girl at Dereham; but even the dark-eyed girl must not be permitted to come between him and his first passion.

So he determined to settle it. Perhaps he had another motive also for this. He was a shrewd, though not a vain man, and Mary was not a very perfect actress. She meant to hide that she cared too much for John, but John, and perhaps Maud, noticed the change in her manner, and missed the true ring of genuine sweetness, which was one of its characteristics.

After he had made up his mind to ask Maud for a decisive answer, John Dalton went twice to the little house at Chelsea without having an opportunity of doing so. But the third time he succeeded. A sudden and violent thunderstorm was raging when he arrived. This storm had detained Mary longer than she

intended to be absent from home when she had started on one of her usual errands of kindness, and thus John Dalton found Maud alone.

"This is a sharp storm," he said. "Why, Maud, are you afraid?" And he took hold of one of her cold, chill hands.

"Not exactly afraid," she answered, "but—but in a storm like this, you seem nearer the unseen, don't you? There's something so mighty, so terrible, in those great peals—Ah!—what a flash!" And Maud shuddered and drew closer to Dalton.

"You are nervous," he said quietly, and he still held her cold, chill hand in his.

The storm raged round them for a few minutes longer, and then amid a fierce rain-pour, the thunder-clouds moved onward, but Dalton still stood there by the side of Maud.

"It is passing away," he said presently. "Look up, Maud, now; there is a gleam of sunshine breaking through the clouds."

Maud looked up, gave a long quivering sigh, and would have drawn her hand from Dalton's.

"No, let it stay," he said. "I am glad to find you alone to-day, Maud—for I want you to tell me that you will be my wife."

Maud did not speak for a moment, and her head fell down until it nearly touched the hand of Dalton.

"Well, have you no answer?" he asked.

"What can I say?" she said, looking up and speaking with deep emotion. "But what I told you before—that it cannot, cannot be!"

"But why, Maud?"

"Do not ask me, John," answered Maud, rising hastily, and beginning to pace the little room. "There is a secret in my life—a dark, dark secret—I can never marry now."

It was now Dalton's turn to be silent. He stood there watching the girl—pitying her with all his heart.

"You will not confide in me, then?" he said after a short pause.

"It would do no good," said Maud. "If you heard this—this—miserable story—you would just say what I tell you now—that I could not marry you; that you would not marry me."

"Yet I wish to hear it."

"I cannot, cannot tell you!" said Maud, and she wrung her hands.

"Is it," said John Dalton, his usual clear and

distinct tones growing husky, "is it connected with your unfortunate cousin's death—with the tragedy at Redcote Farm?"

Maud did not speak. She wrung her hands, she flung herself on her knees by a couch, and buried her face.

"Tell me, Maud," continued Dalton, advancing to her side, and laying his hand on her shoulder. "Believe me, you will not regret that you have trusted me—from the first, my poor, poor girl, I knew that sorrow for this young man's death was not alone the shadow that rested on your life."

"What! what! did you guess?" gasped Maud.

"When you were very ill at Dereham," said Dalton, gently, "I stood by your bed one night, Maud, and I heard you murmur words which told me—or rather led me to guess—a sad, sad story."

"And Mary heard this, too?" said Maud, starting to her feet, while a terrified look came over her face. "Oh! John, John!" she went on, "I would that I were dead—Oh! if I had only died before all this sin and shame came upon me. But," she added, "I did it innocently!

I will tell you now—I will trust you—but—"

At this moment both Dalton and Maud saw from the windows Mary arrive at the door of the house. She had been detained by the storm, and now drove up in a cab, interrupting the confession that was just about to be uttered by Maud.

"Write what you were going to tell me," said Dalton, hastily. "Do this at once, dear Maud—go to your room now, and write it, and I will stay here and talk to Mrs. Stivers."

Maud hesitated an instant, and then quickly left the room, just as Mary entered the hall. Mary saw the girl leave the little drawing-room, and she saw, too, the marks of emotion on her face—her swollen eyelids, her disordered hair.

"You have been caught in the storm, I fear?" said John Dalton the next moment, going into the hall and addressing Mary.

"Yes," answered Mary, but not in her usual sweetness of tone.

"Are you afraid?" continued Dalton. "Miss Eliot seems afraid."

Mary made no reply. "He is acting to me," she thought, and the idea made her feel very angry.

"Have you been here long?" she presently asked, when John Dalton had followed her into the drawing-room.

"Perhaps half an hour," he said.

"And you've had an interesting conversation?" said poor Mary, trying to hide her feelings.

"We have had a very painful one," answered John Dalton, gravely.

"A painful one?" repeated Mary.

"Yes—and let me ask you a favour, Mrs. Stivers. Please say nothing of this conversation to Maud, for it has greatly upset her."

"You have a strong interest in Maud," said Mary, in a trembling and hesitating voice.

"Yes, a very strong interest," answered John Dalton, yet more gravely, and there was something in his manner that implied more than his words.

Mary's handsome face turned red, and then deadly pale. Yet she had no real reason to envy Maud. That unhappy girl was seated at her desk, weeping blinding tears of regret and shame. She was writing a letter to John Dalton—a letter which she believed would end his regard for her for ever.

This letter reached the young barrister at his chambers on the following morning. His pale face flushed as he read it, and his hands trembled—the confession of the woman he loved—of the woman he had asked to be his wife!

I write this, John (he read), because I promised you I would write it; because nothing in this world can make much matter to me now; and because it is better that you should know. After you have read it, it will be all over between us, and it is but right that it should be so.

I will not tell you of my early girlhood; why should I tell you of it? I will only tell you what happened last New Year's Day, and then you will understand the dreadful shadow which ever since has lain so dark and heavy upon my soul.

On that day, then, after I had parted with George Rendall in the kitchen at Redcote, I went up to my own room. You remember I told this in my evidence at the trial, but I did not tell that when I got there I heard George laughing and talking outside. This made me feel very angry, and I went to one of the back rooms and looked out on the stable yard. At the door of the stable George was standing smoking and laughing, and half quarrelling with Jenny Wren. Their familiarity—their apparent utter forgetfulness of my presence in the house, almost maddened me, and with rage and jealousy (of which I was ashamed) burning in my heart, I stood and watched them nearly an hour. Then Jenny came into the house and went upstairs, and I heard her go into my uncle's bedroom to arrange it, and then up to George's room, which was in the front of the house, over mine. When I heard her there, a sudden

impulse—a passion I could not control—seized upon me, and I determined to go down to the stable and bitterly abuse George for his heartless conduct to me, and for his disgraceful familiarity with the girl Jenny Wren.

I ran downstairs, and I ran swiftly across the stable yard; but George was not now in the stable, but in the loft above it, which he had fitted up as a workshop. He was sitting writing at the table by the window when I went up to the loft, and when he saw me he looked very angry.

Bitter words burst like a torrent from my lips. To these he answered by half-taunting ones. Then, when I went behind him, I saw he was writing out some verses addressed "*To Mary.*" Fury, madness, seized upon me when I saw this. In passionate words I upbraided him, and in vain and idle ones he replied. Then I became mad—mad, John—do you understand?—*mad!* I felt a sudden rush of blood to my head, and I seized a heavy leaden-headed hammer that was standing in the corner of the loft, and with all my force I flung it at him. I saw it strike him—I saw his head fall—but I never looked again. I fled out of the stable loft, fled to my own room; and all the rest of the day—so God help me—I expected to hear George's voice—and I determined to run away—to go anywhere—to drown myself, perhaps—but not to stay at Redcote Farm.

I never thought I had killed him—never, never! I knew the hammer had struck him, but I thought most likely he would come into the house and be very angry. Then, when he did not come in, I supposed he had gone to Fothergal's Farm. Jenny's awful cries first told me the truth. You know the rest; only had the trial gone against Jenny—had the verdict been given against her, I was going to stand up in court and tell the jury and the judge the same story that I have now told you.

MAUD ELIOT.

John Dalton read this confession to the end, and then began pacing backwards and forwards in the room, with knitted brows and bitten lips.

Shall we look for a moment into his heart? Into the heart of an ambitious, hard-working man, who meant to rise and win a great name, and who had hitherto put everything aside that could interfere with this purpose.

"Can I marry her?" he was thinking. "Marry a woman with a blight upon her life—such a blight upon her heart? And yet what was she but a victim—an innocent, impulsive victim—of a bad and heartless man? Poor girl, poor child! And she would have stood up in court, would she, and told her story? Yes; it is her nature—the warm, tender, passionate nature that has been so bruised and broken in the world."

Still he wavered. He loved her; but he had a purpose in his life before he had seen Maud, and he had that purpose still. If this ever leaked out—if men could even point with the finger of scorn to his wife—what use, then, would be his ambition? what use the honours that he himself might win?

But no one knew, he remembered; no one would ever know. The grave had closed over George Rendall, and Jenny had been tried and acquitted of his murder, and no shadow of suspicion had fallen on anyone else. He knew not of the weird warning Maud had received before she had quitted Dereham; knew of no Silent Watchers but the stars, that the unhappy girl had babbled of in her fevered dreams. Maud had not told him of the strange words Jenny Wren had placed in her hands, or perhaps this knowledge might have influenced John Dalton.

For in the end, love, generosity, pity, were the victors in his mental struggle. He would take her to his breast, he decided. He would shield this bruised, half-broken heart—forget her blighted youth and the dark stain that almost without any real guilt had fallen upon her.

Before the day was over Maud received the following words :—

The story of the unhappy accident by which your unfortunate cousin met his death has not changed my love, Maud. Let the subject never be named again between us. No

human eye saw what took place on that miserable day at Redcote Farm ; then let no human tongue ever speak of it. I will call to see you to-morrow evening, and let us not think of the past, but of the bright future which I trust may still be before us.

Yours faithfully,

JOHN DALTON.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SILENT WATCHER.

Bitter, miserable tears were shed over this letter—bitter, bitter tears. Maud knew not of the struggle which had passed through John Dalton's heart; knew only that his love and his generosity were very great. But she had not told him all, she thonght. There was still a secret—that terrible letter in which she was warned that her cousin's death agony was not unseen.

"I will tell him," she decided. But when John Dalton came, her courage failed her. He took her in his arms, he kissed her lips, and she felt she could not make their meeting miserable.

Yet she was nervous and ill at ease. When John Dalton spoke of their future, she only gave very vague and uncertain answers. They

were all alone, for Mary had started in the morning on a short visit to her sister-in-law, Miss Stivers. Mary felt that she was better away. She was sure now that Dalton cared for Maud, and she could not trust herself—could not be sure of her self-control if she saw them together.

So she told Maud she was going away for a few days. She tried to be kind in her manner when she said this, and yet she knew she was not kind. But Maud scarcely noticed the difference. She was thinking of her coming meeting with John Dalton—thinking of the letter of which it seemed so hard and difficult to tell.

She tried twice to do this when he came in the evening. Once when he came into the room ; and again when they were about to part.

" If—if—I could but forget," she faltered, and her head fell upon his breast.

" Maud," answered John Dalton, almost sternly, " you *must* forget. Let the past be blotted out of your existence ; you are about to begin a new life—begin it to-day."

" Yes," said Maud, and she had not courage to say more.

She went with him into the little garden in front of the house and stood talking with him there—talking almost as happy lovers talk. But the dark shadow still lay heavy upon her heart; the shadow which at that moment was creeping closer and closer on her path.

For scarcely had she parted with John Dalton—while his touch still lingered on her hand—before she was startled by hearing her name uttered, or rather whispered, by a man who seemed to her to be a passing stranger.

She was leaning on the railing of the little garden. It was bright moonlight; John Dalton's tall figure had just vanished in the silvered haze, when that hoarse whisper fell upon her ears—

"Miss Eliot?"

Maud looked up with a startled gaze.

By the moonlight she saw a man standing on the other side of the railing; a man with a soft felt hat slouched over his face, and with 'kerchief tied so high on his chin that it seemed as if it were done for some purpose of disguise.

Maud looked at this man, and then without speaking raised herself up from the garden railing and began to move towards the house.

But again her name came hissing to her ears through the misty night-haze.

"Miss Eliot, I want to speak to ye."

Maud turned cold with fear. But she moved a step backwards and faced the man.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"D'ye mind me?" half-whispered the man, and he pulled the 'kerchief down from his face and pushed his felt hat back from his brow. Then Maud remembered the man; remembered the straight features, the brown skin and the dark, gleaming eyes of Jack Foster, the poacher!

She turned sick and faint; she grasped the railings for support.

"I don't want to harm ye, Miss," went on the man. "Ye played me a shabby trick, and took no heed of the lines I sent ye from Dereham gaol, though I had held my tongue when I might maybe have had ye hanged if I'd spoken. But I held my tongue because George Rendall but got his due, when ye felled him that day wi' the hammer in the loft."

"Hush, hush, for God's sake, hush!" cried Maud, and she fell against the railings utterly overcome.

Jack Foster gave a low laugh.

"Ay," he said, "and yet ye would not lift ye'r finger to get that gentleman who spoke up in the court for Jenny, to speak for me! I got six months for shooting a bird or two, for there was naught else against me, and he would have got me off if ye had but said a word. However that's done and gone, and I've not come here to talk about it. I've come for something else—Jenny found out where you were, and—"

"Well?" said Maud, and she lifted her white, stony face, and looked at the man with some of the courage of despair.

Still Jack Foster hesitated.

"Ye see, Miss," he said, twisting and moving uneasily, "Jenny Wren didn't behave right to me once. Before she went to Redcote she and I had sweet-hearted a bit; but when she got there she took up wi' Mr. George. Ay, I know she did," continued the man, almost fiercely, "though now she says but idle talk passed between them. But she turned her back on me, anyhow—but that, too, is all come and gone! George is lying in his grave, and Jenny paid dear enough for what she'd done;

though had the trial gone against her I would have spoken up, though I knew I might get my own neck into trouble if I did.

"Why? Why have you come now, then?" said Maud, still looking at the man.

"It was Jenny thought of it first," answered Foster. "Ye see, miss, I was awful riled that ye would not try to help me after I sent ye the lines—and Jenny had stood by me in my trouble—and when I got out of quad we got together again, and the end of it is we want to try our luck together across the seas. Jenny got out what I knew about George's end, and she thought ye would be glad to give us a helping hand, and get us both clean out of the country, and so she got to know where ye were through some lass that had once lived wi' the parson's wife at Norseley, and she sent me here.'

"And you want," faltered Maud, "money—money to go away."

"That's just it, miss! We want money enough to take us both to Australia, and set up in a bit of a place of our own there. Three hundred or so will do it; and it's not much to pay a fellow for holding his tongue, when a word would land ye in a goal."

"What do you know?" asked Maud, almost sternly, for she was driven to bay. "Where were you when—when George Rendall died?"

"I was kneeling under the loft window, Miss, at the back o' the stable. I'd been hanging about the place the best part of the day, and I'd watched George wi' Jenny most an hour talking in the stable-yard. Then ye came and ran across the yard wi' rage written on ye'r face, and went up to the loft after George. The window was open in the loft, and I heard what ye said —then ye felled him, and—"

But a cry of such anguish here interrupted Foster, that the man paused.

"Don't take on so, miss," he said a moment later, with a rough idea of consolation. "George only got his due, and Jenny says the same. If ye'll fork out the brass no one will ever be the wiser."

"I will think," said Maud, and she put her hand to her head. "I will write—where shall I write?"

"Just drop a bit line to *The Silent Watcher*, care of the landlord o' the Seven Stars, in Lupus Street, where I'm putting up. He's a friend o' mine, and in the same line o' business on the quiet, and he'll take care o' the lines,

and the Silent Watcher will do as well as another name."

"The Silent Watcher!" repeated Maud, and again she put her hand to her head. She felt stunned; everything seemed whirling round her, and it took all her strength to be able to stagger into the house.

When she got there she sat down, and moaned aloud, as if in deadly pain. It was more than she could bear, she thought—more than she could bear!

Then she crept up to her own room, and lay all through the night moaning and waking. But in the morning hideous dreams came to her in snatches of sleep that was not rest. Presently she got up, and stared out of the windows at the rolling river, and her mind seemed to follow the water, and she began to forget, and to feel only in a dark maze, from which there was no escape.

She tried to rouse herself; tried to think. What could she do! Tell John Dalton—no, no, no—and she moaned again. What could she do? she kept repeating, but she did nothing, sitting all day without food, without settled thought, without hope.

In the evening John Dalton came, and was shocked and startled by her appearance. There was a wildness in the gleam of her dark eyes that he had seen before, that struck a chill feeling of fear into his soul. He was very gentle to her, and spoke only soothing words; but her answers were so vague, and her manner so uncertain, that he left her full of alarm.

Then another dark night came, and during it the unhappy girl lost control over her reason, and she began singing at midnight in the voice of madness. The maid-servant in the house heard, and crept downstairs, and listened breathlessly to that wild melody, and in the early morning she sent for John Dalton.

When he came, Maud did not know him. She was sitting up in bed, drawing her fingers through her long hair, and babbling ceaselessly. It was a pitiful sight; pitiful even to strangers, but bitter, bitter pain to the man who loved her, who had been ready to sacrifice so much to call her his wife.

There was a dismal burden to her song too. Ever and again she called out that she saw the Silent Watchers—that countless eyes were gleaming at her—a voice calling on her name.

John Dalton stood and listened, and grew pale at some of her wild words. He telegraphed for Mary, and before the evening that gentle woman was again watching by Maud's bedside. "She was very ill," the doctor told them; "it was the brain," and he asked if any great trouble or anxiety had lately fallen upon her.

Mary and Dalton looked at each other at the doctor's question. Then Dalton spoke.

"She has had great trouble and anxiety," he said; "a painful tragedy had happened in her family, and she had brain fever at the time, and had never quite recovered from its effects."

The doctor looked very grave.

"A second attack," he said, "is very serious; the poor young lady must be carefully watched."

They watched her all that day, and for many days, but no change ever came. Always the same wild song, always the same wild words, but by-and-bye the voice grew weaker, and the bright glittering eyes more dull.

Then one night, in the grey twilight, Maud Eliot died. John Dalton was sitting by her side; he was holding her poor quivering hand, when quite suddenly she started up in her bed, and called out his name.

"John! John!" she cried, "don't let them take me—don't let them take me!" And she fell forward into Dalton's arms.

He drew her to his breast, he lifted her head, but as he did so, with a long quivering sigh, Maud's spirit passed, and her broken, miserable heart grew still.

. . . . . .

It was midnight before Dalton left the house where Maud's still form now lay. His head was bowed on his breast, and great bitter grief was in his heart. But he had made but little moan. He had stooped down and kissed her after they had straightened her poor limbs, and crossed her hands meekly on her breast, and Mary knew when she saw this, that had Maud lived, John Dalton would have made her his wife.

As Dalton then left the house, where the poor dead girl lay, a man came up and addressed him, who had been lurking about for hours outside.

"How is Miss Maud, sir?" he said. "How is the young lady?"

Then John Dalton lifted his head, and looked at the man, and by the lamp-light he recog-

nised Jack Foster, the poacher, from Redcote.

"You here?" exclaimed John Dalton. "Then—" And he began to understand Maud's sudden illness.

"How is Miss Maud to-night, sir?" repeated Foster.

"She is dead," answered John Dalton sternly. "What are you doing here?"

"Dead!" said Foster, and he staggered back. "Surely not dead, sir? It can't be—it can't be what I said that killed her?"

"What did you say?" said John Dalton. "Tell me the truth, for nothing can hurt her now."

Then Foster told the same story to Dalton that he had told to Maud. He had overheard the quarrel between the cousins; he had heard the thud of the fatal blow. But partly from fear of the consequences to himself, lest he should be suspected of the murder, he had kept silence on the subject. His motive for now seeking Maud was money, he said—money, so that he might marry Jenny Wren and begin a new life in another country.

Dalton scarcely spoke till the man's tale was done. Then harshly and fiercely he said—

"You have killed her! Fool—why did you not come to me?"

Foster was really repentant.

"I would not have said a word, sir," he said, "if I had known what I was doing. But Jenny wanted me to come, so I just came."

But after a few moments' reflection, Dalton thought of Maud's memory.

"You want money to go out of the country?" he said to Foster. "If I give you a hundred pounds will you and this woman leave England for ever, and never name again—George Rendall's death?"

Foster was but too glad to accept this offer. He married Jenny, and went to Australia, and we must hope they are doing better in their new country than they did in the old one.

They, however, kept their promise while in England, and spoke no more of the tragedy at Redcote Farm. Nor did John Dalton ever speak of it. Maud was buried in one of the great city cemeteries, and lay there unknown and unnoticed. But she was not quite forgotten. A busy and ambitious man sometimes turned out of his daily path to stand a few moments by Maud Eliot's grave. But he

never spoke of these visits—never to the young widow who still lived on in the little house at Chelsea, and to whom John Dalton talked of most things that occurred in his energetic life.

Not even when time went on, and Mary grew nearer and dearer to him, did he ever speak of Maud; not even when Mary bore his name, and cheered and lightened his labours. On this subject he was silent, for he was one of those who never speak of the deepest feelings of their hearts.

THE END.

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